STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

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CALL OF DUTY WWII

First details on the shooter's historic resurrection

PROJECT SCORPIO

INSIDE MICROSOFT'S STUNNING NEW CONSOLE

SUMMER OF SWITCH FEATURING Splatoon 2

NINTENDO TELLS US WHY ITS UNLIKELY HIT IS SET TO TAKE OVER GAMING

INSIDE PROJECT CARS 2

Why this is now the premier hardcore racer in gaming

DEAN "ROCKET" HALL RETURNS

Find out what the DayZ creator has planned next with Stationeers

THE MAKING OF CRASH BANDICOOT

Join us behind the scenes of the creation of one of PlayStation's greatest icons

EVE: SOAP OPERA IN SPACE

How the betrayals, plots and alliances of EVE: Online keep it evolving



ISSUE 187

I have to admit that I didn't entirely understand *Splatoon* at first. The very idea of Nintendo attempting to make a move into the shooter space with such a cartoonish cast of characters seemed a little ridiculous. Why wouldn't it go back to the *Metroid* space? Why not give everyone in the Mushroom Kingdom a FLUDD pack or something? I'm almost ashamed to say there was a little incredulity.

Of course once I played *Splatoon* I understood what was happening, but even then I wasn't convinced it would have an impact. It was launching on the Wii U, after all, a console with a limited base and perceived to have a low attach rate. And the colourful hero shooter phenomenon hadn't quite happened yet, so frankly *Splatoon* stuck out like a sore thumb.

But it was actually talking to game developers that made me realise something amazing was happening. *Splatoon* didn't just have a niche following, other game makers who had abandoned shooters in the face of toxic online communities and impenetrable gameplay mechanics, were finding a new home with this fledgling Wii U exclusive. And if they were on board how many others outside of the industry bubble would be seeing that opening?

Against the odds the *Splatoon* team managed to tap into something unique and special. It managed to establish a new core brand in the Nintendo family and with *Splatoon 2*, as we found out this issue, it's set to cement its place in the shooter hierarchy too.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR







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44 Feature

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT 2

Motive and DICE sit down to discuss their vision for creating the most intense and fan-pleasing Star Wars game ever

UNDER THE HOOD

Is power enough for Project Scorpio?

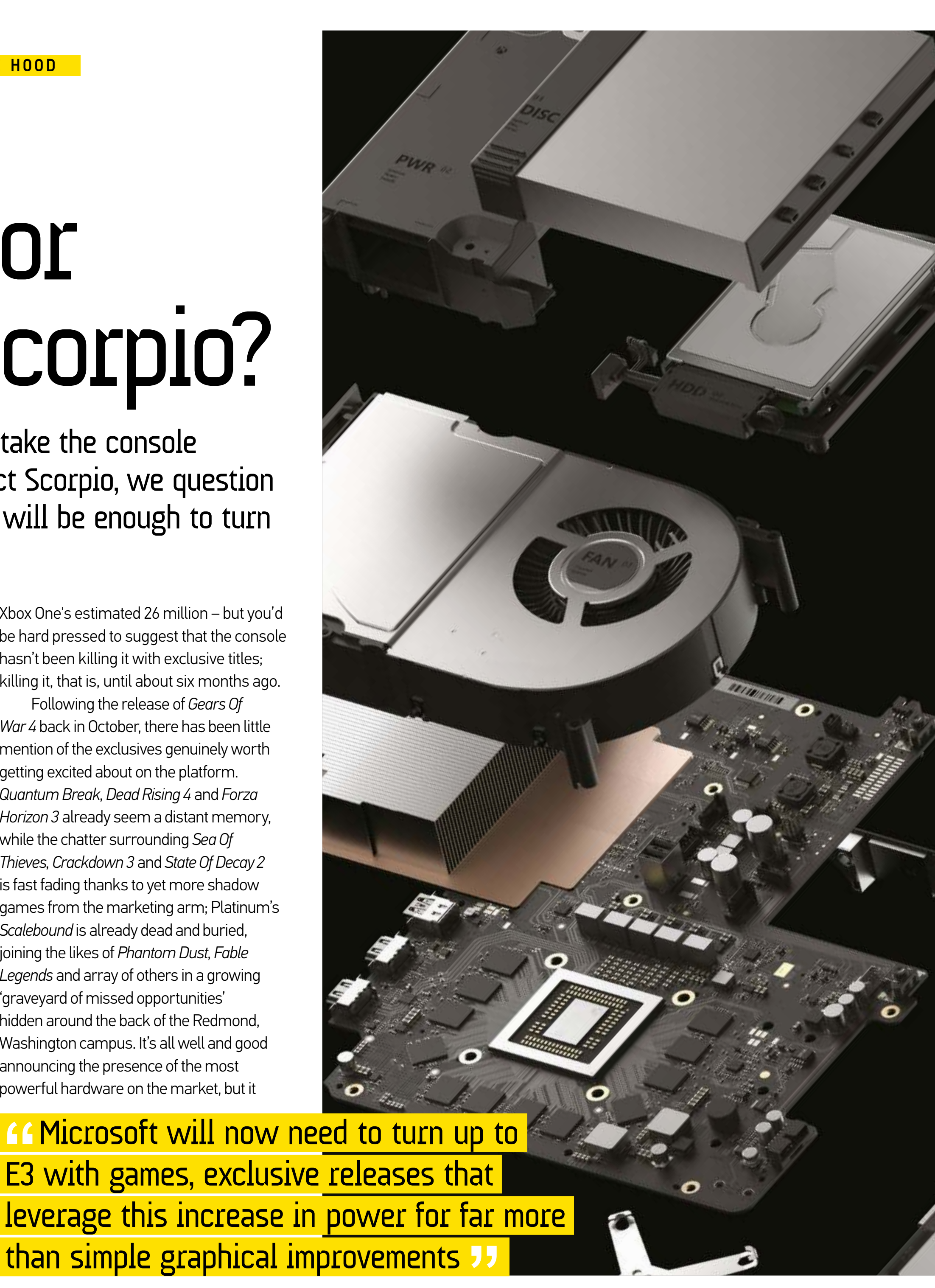
→ With Microsoft looking to take the console market by storm with Project Scorpio, we question whether mere power alone will be enough to turn the tide in its favour

With E3 2017 just a few short weeks away, has Microsoft finally put itself in a position to reclaim some degree of market dominance? After four years of struggling to reclaim its identity it would seem that way, although there is still a long way to go. The company is finally making the relevant moves to back its refreshed marketing message, that the Xbox is the home for the hardcore – under the watchful presence of Phil Spencer – and the first concrete details for Project Scorpio show that there is still fight in the brand yet.

By all accounts, Project Scorpio will indeed be the most powerful console on the market – a line Microsoft has spent the better part of a year maintaining and reaffirming – and that is going to not only bring an immediate benefit to a suite of games in the future, but your existing game library too. The problem right now is that it's difficult to really get a sense of what those games in the future might be, let alone what impact Scorpio will truly have when facing fiercer competition than ever before.

Microsoft may have struggled to keep the pace with its closest competitor over the generation – with the PS4 leading hardware sales with a solid 55 million units versus Xbox One's estimated 26 million – but you'd be hard pressed to suggest that the console hasn't been killing it with exclusive titles; killing it, that is, until about six months ago.

Following the release of *Gears Of War 4* back in October, there has been little mention of the exclusives genuinely worth getting excited about on the platform. *Quantum Break*, *Dead Rising 4* and *Forza Horizon 3* already seem a distant memory, while the chatter surrounding *Sea Of Thieves*, *Crackdown 3* and *State Of Decay 2* is fast fading thanks to yet more shadow games from the marketing arm; Platinum's *Scalebound* is already dead and buried, joining the likes of *Phantom Dust*, *Fable Legends* and array of others in a growing 'graveyard of missed opportunities' hidden around the back of the Redmond, Washington campus. It's all well and good announcing the presence of the most powerful hardware on the market, but it



> "Microsoft will now need to turn up to E3 with games, exclusive releases that leverage this increase in power for far more than simple graphical improvements"

DATA STREAM → NINTENDO HAS DISCONTINUED PRODUCTION OF THE NES MINI DESPITE ITS SUCCESS

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Above The reveal of *Forza Motorsport 7* is essentially a given, with the only game demonstrated on Scorpio hardware thus far being ForzaTech demo, an upscaled version of the *Forza 6* engine.

means very little if there is nothing to play on it that can push that hardware.

If there's one thing to take from all of this, and from the deep dive breakdown of the tech – courtesy of Digital Foundry – that's so heady it'll make all but the most tech savvy of gamers wince with confusion, it's that Microsoft is clearly listening and learning. Sony made a number of mistakes in its marketing and delivery of the PS4 Pro, and that's something Microsoft can take advantage of – even while anticipating a price drop from Sony at E3 in an attempt to spoil the celebrations. Sony has based its entire current generation campaign on being cheaper, more powerful and more diverse than the competition, and it's about to lose its stake in at least one of those claims.

The lingering issue, of course, is that we are still yet to receive any identifiable proof that 4K televisions and HDR bring anything new or warranted to the gaming experience. That's the problem with trying to launch a gaming console designed to impress off of tech that still has no set standard, with television manufacturers unable to settle on the basics of the 4K/HDR/UHD format. Not to mention that it's also essentially impossible to showcase any of the improvements that high-res 4K graphics bring without actually having a 4K display in front of you. There may indeed be a war for market supremacy being waged in 4K but the battle will take place in 1080p, for the time being at least.



Above Judging the specs, Project Scorpio is a huge improvement over the Xbox One and a noticeable upgrade over the PS4 and PS4 Pro. It's about to heat up in the generation war.



Above Microsoft will do well to ensure that third parties are well represented at E3. It needs to show players that Xbox is, once again, the best place to play each and every game.

Microsoft will now need to turn up to E3 with games, exclusive releases that leverage this increase in power for far more than simple graphical improvements, and it'll need a lot of them. The PS4 Pro brought merely a bump in specifications – no doubt the limitations of using the tech available at an affordable price point in 2016 – and so the Xbox has a fantastic chance to jump in and demonstrate to the hardcore what the future of gaming can look like. *Forza 7* setting a 4K at 60fps standard is almost a given at this point, but we will need to see more; wide scale destruction in *Crackdown 3*, the likes we have never seen before, emergent events in *Sea Of Thieves* that we never even considered, and a range of resurrected brands and all-new IP that offer experiences simply unavailable anywhere else. Is that a difficult ask of Microsoft? Perhaps, but that's what's necessary to turn the tide of this strange console generation in Xbox's favour; power is all well and good, but it's redundant if the platform doesn't have the software – the right software – to fight back.

PROJECT SCORPIO VERSUS PS4 PRO

	Scorpio	PS4 Pro
CPU	Eight custom x86 cores	Eight Jaguar cores
CPU SPEED	2.3GHz	2.1GHz
GPU	40 customised compute units	36 improved GCN compute units
GPU SPEED	1172MHz	911MHz
MEMORY (RAM)	12GB GDDR5	8GB GDDR5
RAM BANDWIDTH	326GB/s	218GB/s
HARD DRIVE	1TB 2.5-inch	1TB 2.5-inch
OPTICAL DRIVE	4K UHD Blu-ray	Blu-Ray

MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE WILL OFFICIALLY LAUNCH ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2017, SAYS CAPCOM

BACK FROM THE BRINK

How COD can redeem itself

→ Can Call Of Duty: World War II restore faith in the franchise after a disastrous journey to the stars?

Last year's *Infinite Warfare* pushed *Call Of Duty* to the brink. Activision was given a rude awakening of sorts, forced to publicly understand and recognise that there is a limit to how far it could stretch its biggest franchise. For all its strength in the market, *Call Of Duty* isn't impervious to change – the players made that perfectly clear. And so we are back where we started. *Call Of Duty: World War II* brings us back down to the blood and guts of World War II, the lens shifting from cinematic escapades in the stars to gruelling adventures through humanity's biggest conflict. There's an inherent simplicity to the marketing message – that Activision has listened and, through Sledgehammer Games, it will deliver exactly what we've wanted all along: a return to the era, gameplay, and design ethos that made the franchise so revered to begin with.



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Smaller scope, larger story

1 **If any complaint could be levied at the more modern entries to the *Call Of Duty* series it's that they perhaps lost sight of what was important.** As attention shifted to exploring conflicts off world, to developing futuristic weapons and body permutations, studios stopped focusing on the minutiae of the moment-to-moment combat experience and got lost in the endless possibilities of future science and engineering. By returning to World War II, Sledgehammer will be able to deliver a more focused experience, one that can tell a larger story without sacrificing the soul of the series. By limiting the scope of the story to the Eastern Theatre of war, and by putting so much emphasis on authenticity, it means that *COD: WWII* is essentially forced to stay on course. Sledgehammer is limited to what weapons, battlegrounds and scenarios it can introduce into play, and that will make for a far more focused – and hopefully enjoyable – experience.

Authenticity is important

2 **While *Call Of Duty* is ultimately a game that seeks to find the fun in strife and slaughter, when at its best it often finds a way to make us, the player, consider and confront the realities of war in any given era; to have a better understanding of the conditions and the struggles that our ancestors and peers came face-to-face with.** Focusing so closely on authenticity in *World War II* will give Sledgehammer the means to tell an important story, using the technology of today to capture the intensity of combat. Naturally, capturing that intensity will lend itself to fantastically cinematic set pieces, claustrophobic level design, and frantic engagements that the early *COD* games were so renowned for fostering. Historical authenticity – even if it is just as a set dressing – is the missing ingredient that should bring balance back to the *Call Of Duty* experience.

DATA STREAM → A FALLOUT TABLETOP GAME IS IN PRODUCTION FROM MODIPHIUS ENTERTAINMENT

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Full throttle performance

3 **As every year passes, it becomes more difficult to make a videogame. Building a triple-A quality title in this era requires an ever-escalating amount of personnel, resources and expertise.** *COD: WWII* will have been in development for over three years by its 3 November launch. The PlayStation 4 Pro and Project Scorpio – not even announced when development started – will be available, ushering in an age of Ultra HD 4K gaming and pushing expectations even higher. But this is where Sledgehammer has put itself in an enviable position. Without having to develop systems to incorporate the likes of Exo-Suits and shifting gravity into play – not to mention paying Kevin Spacey's no doubt stratospheric contract fee – Sledgehammer is free to focus on the details. The emphasis suddenly shifts to fostering huge, arresting engagements with rudimentary tools; map design should improve as the three-lane design takes precedence over verticality, and the fan-favourite weapons of World War II mean weapon feel and feedback are more important than ever.

Reenergised multiplayer

4 **If *Battlefield 1* proved anything, it's that it's possible to make an enjoyable multiplayer experience with antiquated weapons and machinery.** Sledgehammer Games has promised a return to *Call Of Duty*'s roots as it approaches multiplayer; while we aren't expecting it to change radically, falling in-line with *Battalion 1944*'s way of nostalgic thinking, we do expect to see a number of interesting shifts to occur in the basic design. Maps with a more focused design lead to larger, more interesting engagements between players and – given that Sledgehammer is already teasing a multiplayer social hub that can hold an impressive amount of players – we expect the size of multiplayer teams and games to improve significantly. *COD* isn't looking to challenge *Battlefield* for huge-scale action, but it should be looking to create an experience that brings the fierce, threatening and unrelenting pace of single-player scenarios, such as the Normandy beach landings, to the multiplayer arena.

A chance to reset

5 **Sledgehammer clearly recognised the growing tide of discontent through some of the hardcore communities and players when it began development on *COD: WII.*** There's been a increasing concern for half a decade that *Call Of Duty* was losing sight of its values, and this will be an opportunity to completely clear the board. Nothing will be sacred either; if Sledgehammer wants to use the World War II period as the excuse for removing perks and Pick-10, for rebalancing regenerating health, movement speed and weapon spread, you better believe it will. If we are to take everything Sledgehammer is saying at face value – a dangerous prospect in itself – then this is to be the *Call Of Duty* many have spent the better part of a decade pining after, although that will bring its own set of challenges and risks. You may think an authentic, World War II-set, condensed *Call Of Duty* is what you wanted – just don't be too surprised if that means something different today than it did back in 2005.



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"If Blizzard would release an expansion pack to Diablo II right now I would play it"

KEVIN STEPHENS, MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS



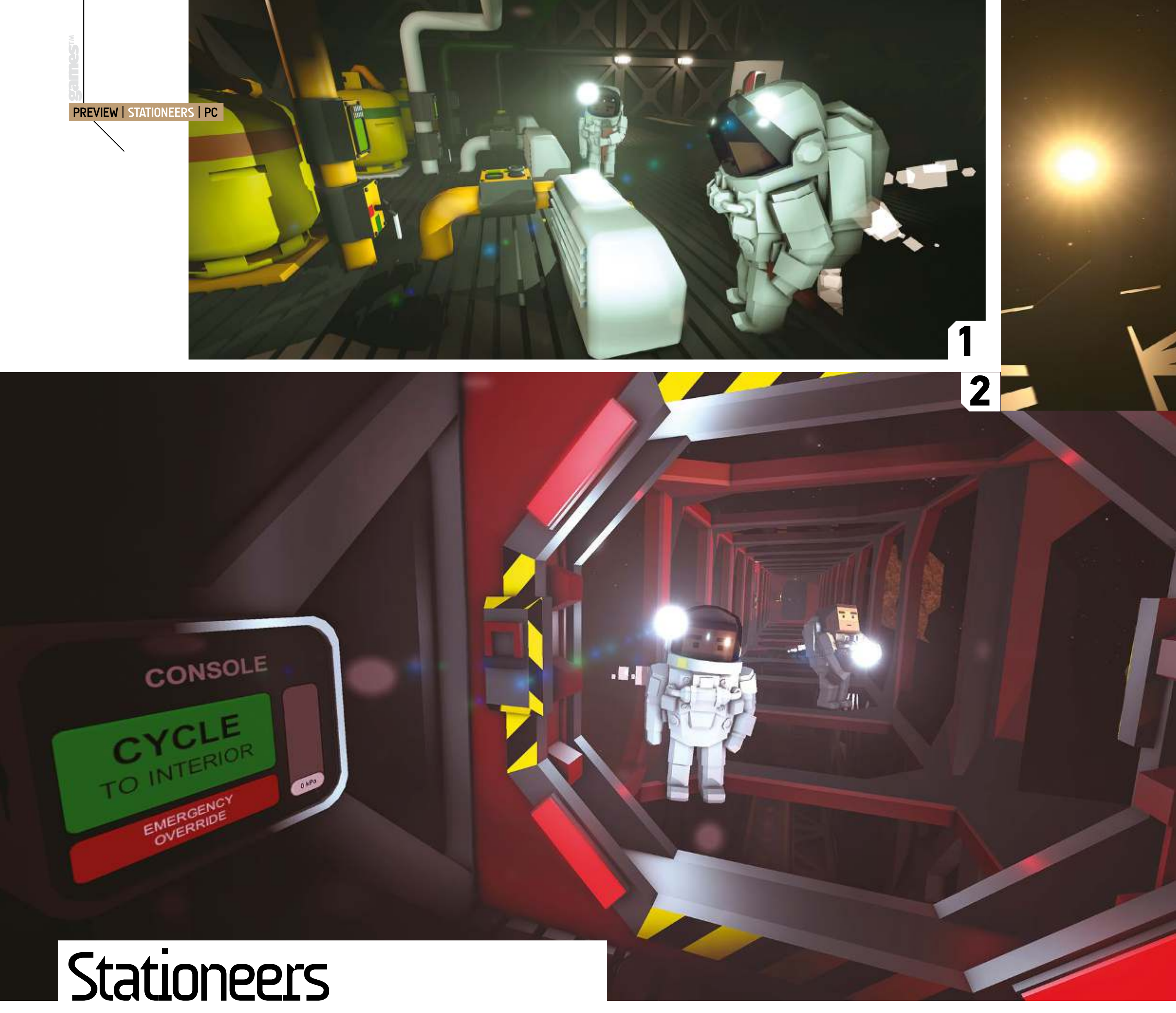
WHY I ♥...

DIABLO II

KEVIN STEPHENS
MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS, STUDIO HEAD

I love Diablo II, *it is my all-time favourite game. I love it because I feel like it is the best and most balanced experience that you could play, like, forever. If Blizzard would release an expansion pack to* Diablo II *right now I would play it. I just love that game; it's difficult for me to even put into words why I love it, it's more of an emotion. It's so pure…*

I remember when I played it the most, I would start it – but I would be home by myself, my girlfriend would be gone – and I would have to go in to the other room to fold laundry or whatever and I would just hear the menu music wafting through and I'd be getting excited, like Pavlov's Dogs – 'Yeah! I get to play Diablo II *again!' So, yeah, it is by far my all time favourite game.*



Stationeers

CONCEPT ■ *DayZ* creator Dean Hall takes another stab at survival, this time pushing you into the most brutal and engaging survival and building sim ever designed.

Life comes at you fast

Dean Hall has too often been a victim of his own ambition. His first attempt at finding success was, of course, *DayZ*, which has since failed to escape Early Access. The second, *Ion*, failed to make it that far, dying quietly in the conceptual stage; far from the bright lights of the E3 stage it was revealed on just two years prior to great fanfare and curiosity. So where does that leave Hall, a developer with an eye for challenging iteration and approaching familiar game concepts with an almost mean spirited tenacity? Lost in the stars and looking for adventure, pitching a cruel, warped vision of *Minecraft* meeting *Space Station 13* in the form of *Stationeers*; an exceptionally complex game that is as intriguing as it is foreboding. That's a dangerous cocktail but, like we said before, Dean Hall is nothing if not extremely ambitious and this is certainly his biggest test yet.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: New Zealand
Publisher: Rocketwerkz
Developer: In-house
Release: 2017
Players: 1-16

Developer Profile

Rocketwerkz is a brand new studio formed by Dean Hall, the ex-Bohemia Interactive studio head responsible for the creation and iteration of *DayZ*. He later abandoned his studio, creating Rocketwerkz in 2014, but is yet to officially release a product following the cancellation of Xbox One exclusive *Ion* earlier this year.

High Point

While Dean Hall left Bohemia Interactive in 2014, *DayZ* is still the high point of his career, demonstrating his creativity and perseverance as he worked to get the *ARMA 2* mod into Early Access.

Developer History

Speed Racer: The Videogame **2008 [Wii]**
DayZ **2013 [PC]**

1 FAMILIAR DESIGN WITH A COMBATITIVE APPROACH

Stationeers has an easy to understand premise: build a base by yourself or with a few friends, make it operational, and then proceed to explore the galaxy from within it. The reality, however, isn't as simple as it seems. Heading off in search of adventure and areas unknown requires a ton of investment, skill and persistence; your base needs to become self-sufficient before you can begin to build a ship, let alone leave on it. Stationeers is a multi-layered and complex game by design, taking the basic foundations of *Minecraft* and *Space Station 13* to new extremes.



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"Stationeers is clearly designed for groups that wish to play regularly, working together to achieve small, approachable goals"

2 STATIONEERS' INFLUENCES ARE CLEAR, THE EXECUTION IS NOT

Dean Hall is open about the influence *Space Station 13* has had on his work and design ambitions, and it's clear to see here. *Space Station 13* is a top-down multiplayer game in which people take on a vast array of roles aboard a station in an effort to keep it running. It's proven impossible to emulate thus far, but Hall believes he has finally cracked it, taking the basics and melding it with *Minecraft*'s penchant for systemic and steady building practices; only, now, progression is meant to takes days and weeks, not mere minutes or hours.

3 RUNNING A STATION IS NO EASY BUSINESS

It's difficult to get a sense of the larger picture with *Stationeers*, even after getting your hands on it, because so much of the project is designed to work slowly and methodically – governed by reason and logic. While structures and systems are designed block by block in *Minecraft*, *Stationeers* is multi-layered, asking you not only to build walls but the items contained within them. Walls, for example, require a basic frame, which insulation and metal sheets must be welded on to. Then you'll need to consider pressurisation in each room – which involves mixing various mined and gathered gasses before pumping them into the area.

4 DAUNTING PRESENTATION HAS AN EXCITING ARRAY OF POSSIBILITIES

Given the difficulty of achieving the most basic of processes, it's easy to understand the complexity behind *Stationeers*, even if it isn't obviously apparent in the pre-Alpha build we got our hands on. Something as simple as making a light switch function – requiring casing, circuit board, a covering and the relevant program inserted into it – could take a considerable amount of time to complete; the idea of actually making a working station with doors, proper pressurisation and, eventually, the ability to travel through space is dauntingly engaging. *Stationeers* is clearly designed for groups that wish to play regularly, working together to achieve small, approachable goals over time.

5 IT'S ALSO A SURVIVAL GAME, IF IT WASN'T RIDICULOUS ENOUGH

Stationeers also features a collection of brutal survival mechanics. There's no air or water on the strange alien planets you begin on, so you'll quickly need to work together to find a solution. Do you know what the molecular composition of air or water is? You'll need to find out, and quickly. Your lungs can be permanently damaged by any amount of depressurisation and suffocation; your body will be affected by poor hygiene and care should you avoid eating or showering – and then there is the prospect of virtual insanity to consider, too.



POSITIONING IS IMPORTANT

■ Each card needs to be assigned to its applicable row – melee, ranged and siege – as denoted by the icons on the left side of the card, though the importance of this only comes into play as you attempt to mitigate adverse weather affects placed onto the board. The other type of unit positioning means you can now choose where you want to place cards on the row, heavily factoring into how abilities interact with allied and enemy units.



Gwent: The Witcher Card Game

CONCEPT ■ CD Projekt Red takes its hugely popular card-battling game out of *The Witcher 3* and makes it a standalone project, improving depth and accessibility.

Time well spent

The in-universe card game proved to be so hugely popular within the pubs and streets of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*'s world that it made perfect sense for developer CD Projekt Red to spin the *Gwent* into its own standalone game. Already in beta on PC and Xbox One – with the PS4 version expected to launch shortly thereafter – *Gwent* has proven to be a monstrously-fun time sink, offering competitive card gaming action without any of the hang-ups or convoluted card mechanics that can too often hold titles such as *Hearthstone* and *Magic: The Gathering* back from their true potential.

There's a considered simplicity and untold depth to *Gwent* at this early stage, its balance held intact by a relatively contained array of cards and factions; a recent update brings the number of cards available in the game to over 60, split between five factions – Northern Realms, Scoia'tael, Skellige, Monsters and Nilfgaard. There is a real pleasure to be had from getting into such a complex and deep game at the ground level, it's the perfect opportunity to enjoy the release and learn its basics before it becomes flooded by new expansions and proficiencies. *Gwent* has proven to be a challenging delight.

ATTACK STRATEGY

■ Every card has different properties that can often affect your strategies. There is a scalable difficulty to this and it's here where the real gulf in skill and survivability begins to present itself; knowing when to place a unit down that can attack and subsequently lower an enemy's strength is vital, as too is knowing when to use spy cards, giving your foe an initial strength boost while preparing for a later windfall. And then there's the all-important weather cards.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Poland
Publisher: CD Projekt
Developer: CD Projekt Red
Release: 2017
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

CD Projekt Red is one of the biggest and most beloved independent developers in the world, coming from humble origins it is now a respected powerhouse in the RPG scene following the release and post-launch support of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

High Point

The developer's first two *Witcher* games were moderately well received, however the critical and commercial success of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* catapulted the Polish studio into legendary status.

Developer History

The Witcher **2007 [PC]**
The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings **2011 [PC, X360]**
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt **2015 [PC, Xbox One, PS4]**



BUILDING STRENGTH

■ The objective is to have a higher strength rating than your opponent, with each game played out across a best two out of three rounds. It isn't merely about getting your highest strength cards out early, though, as you'll need to plan ahead to ensure you have enough cards to make viable plays in future rounds. Minimal amounts of cards are returned to your hand between rounds, and sensing when to forfeit is as important as knowing when to push on for victory.

DESK BUILDING

■ As with any great card game, deck building is a true skill. While you can gain cards for winning games and advancing your rank, you'll want to focus on earning in-game resources to build out specific cards, all done in an effort to better serve your optimal build. Knowing how to scale strength cards versus round-altering potions and defence-orientated units is a skill that will emerge after many hours of trial and error, allowing you to make a tailor-made deck to suit your own style of play.

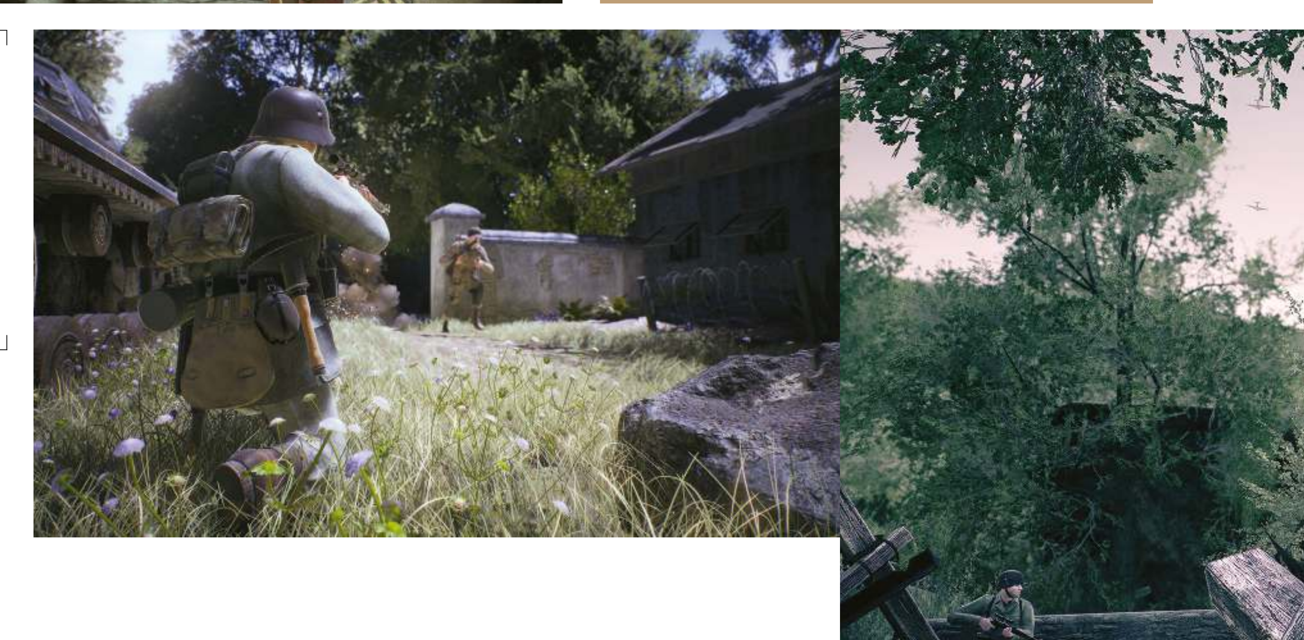
Battalion 1944 is the spiritual successor to many of the World War II shooters that came to define and shape much of the multiplayer PC scene a decade ago, games that rely on skill and reactions more so than anything else.



BATTALION HEADS TO BETA

BULKHEAD INTERACTIVE WILL be using a series of open beta tests to help sharpen up the shooter ahead of release, using community feedback as a way of refocusing bug fixing, weapon balance and server stabilisation efforts. That's especially important in a game of *Battalion*'s calibre; designed to attract hardcore, no-nonsense shooter fans that have let nostalgia craft an idolised version of *Call Of Duty 2* and *Day Of Defeat* in their heads. That means *Battalion* will have very little room for error when it launches later in 2017, and the studio seems to be using every available resource to ensure that its Unreal Engine 4 powered shooter doesn't disappoint after such a convincing crowdfunding campaign. Hands-on time with the game so far would suggest it's in very good shape already, but a good bit of stress testing will likely sharpen everything.

Above: *Battalion 1944* is built using Unreal Engine 4 and, while not as beautiful as triple-A productions such as *Battlefield 1*, it still looks gorgeous, even in this relatively early stage. Right: *Battalion* is about to enter into an Alpha period, which will be opened up to the public so be sure to keep an eye on the official site if you want to give it a try.



Battalion 1944

CONCEPT ■ Crowdfunded by a passionate community eager to see a return of the old-school World War II multiplayer shooter, it's directly inspired by the likes of *Call Of Duty 2* and *Day Of Defeat*.

Hands-on with the old-school-inspired shooter you've been looking for

You've never played a game quite like *Battalion 1944*. Okay, well, that isn't exactly true, because at its heart it's a first-person shooter directly inspired by the likes of *Call Of Duty 2* and *Day Of Defeat* – decade-old games with multiplayer components built to a very specific design template. But where *Battalion 1944* differs to other games that lean heavily on nostalgia to sell themselves, it *feels* like a modern interpretation of the subgenre – taking lessons learned in the last ten years and applying them to a familiar array of battlegrounds, mechanics and weapons.

The World War II shooter is in for one hell of a resurgence in 2017 and developer Bulkhead Interactive will be leading the charge. *Battalion 1944* is on the precipice of entering Alpha and that's given **games™** the opportunity to get our hands on the upcoming, self-proclaimed 'old-school shooter' in a four-versus-four LAN scenario. Initial impressions involve overcoming the steep learning curve and violently coming to terms with the fact that our skills have been unknowingly dampened over the years by shooters leaning on auto-aim and course correction as balancing tools.

Battalion 1944 is uncompromisingly basic in this respect; there are no perks, enhanced abilities or loadouts to play about with here in an attempt to artificially turn the tide of battle in your favour. When it comes to shooters of this ilk, you've either got it or you don't. It's a simple as four soldiers dressed in American garb grabbing a hold of the semi-automatic powerhouse M1 Garand rifle or the rapid-fire Thompson sub-machine gun and pushing forward against another four playing the part of German Nazis, each seemingly equipped with an overpowered MP40 – which Bulkhead tells us it is already working on tweaking and balancing. Skill is everything in *Battalion*; managing sight lines with cautious positioning is half of it, twitchy reaction times the rest.

> "Handling is vastly improved over the decade-old shooters it takes so much inspiration from"

Where *Battalion 1944* differs from, say, jumping into a legacy server of *COD2*, however, is that it feels modern. The gorgeous environments – a mixture of houses, tight streets and low trenches – powered by Unreal Engine 4 certainly help to modernise play, but it just feels tighter to play. Handling is vastly improved over the decade-old shooters it takes so much inspiration from, aligning with how you remember them to be (as opposed to reality). Movement is smooth and the weapons are precise; your gun feels like a true extension of your dominant mouse hand, and should you get the hang of aiming for the brutally small headshot hitboxes, you'll quickly be rewarded with progression up the leaderboard. In many ways, despite being marketed as a shooter for the begrudged generation of FPS players that feel like the industry left them behind, it feels like a welcomed alternative to *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. A little rougher round the edges, as it stands, but it's still as competitive and aggressive, all the same.

Speaking with the folks from Bulkhead during our session two things became immediately clear: the young team, largely responsible for existential puzzle games *Pneuma: Breath Of Life* and *The Turing Test*, have a deep appreciation of *Call Of Duty 2* and a very real, genuine desire to hear its fledging community out. This Kickstarter success is being built by a passionate group and they want the fans to guide its development forward. At EGX Rezzed, the team could be heard at the end of sessions asking for suggestions from players, meticulously noting any bug reports and seen at panels imploring fans to come forward with any criticism or concerns. So many videogames are developed in bubbles, which can often mean mistakes are unwittingly made early in development – Bulkhead is looking to avoid such a scenario. This is especially true as it looks to open up access to the game for Kickstarter backers and fans alike, giving everybody the opportunity to not only help guide development, but drop into a truly authentic, exhilarating online multiplayer experience the likes of which has been gone for too long, but certainly not forgotten.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Bulkhead Interactive
Release: 2017
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Built as a collaboration between Deco Studios and Bevel Studios. They had previously collaborated on *Pneuma: Breath Of Life*, a game designed to leverage the power of Unreal to enhance an array of interesting independent game ideas.

Developer History

Pneuma: Breath Of Life **2015 [PC, Xbox One, PS4]**
The Turing Test **2016 [PC, Xbox One, PS4]**

High Point

The Turing Test was an ambitious first-person puzzle game that showcased the talents of Bulkhead Interactive, a young upstart company in the heart of the UK.

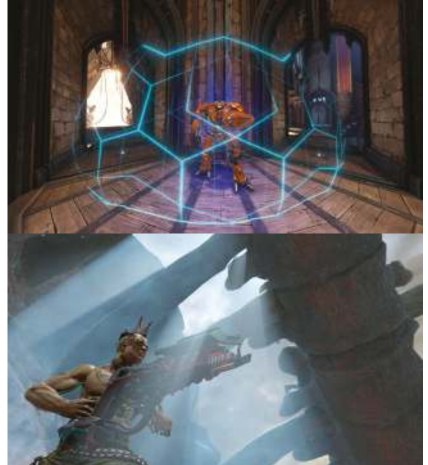




■ Above: The focus for *Battalion*'s map design is on tight, asymmetrical and intricately designed spaces. They are easy to navigate and learn but difficult to master, and those with an eye for positioning will quickly find themselves in a position of dominance.



"Shooting in Champions feels as great as it always did, proving once and for all that the studio hasn't lost its touch"



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: id Software
Release: 2017
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

Founded in 1991 by John Carmack, John Romero, Tom Hall and Adrian Carmack (no relation), id Software would go on to create some of the most important releases in gaming history. The studio essentially built the template and standards for FPS design, one that's still used to this day.

Developer History

Wolfenstein 3D **1992 [PC]**
DOOM **1993 [PC]**
Quake III Arena **1999 [PC]**
RAGE **2011 [X360, PS3, PC]**

High Point

Quake III Arena still stands as one of the best multiplayer shooters on the market, a timeless release that's still popular in some circles today.

Quake Champions

CONCEPT ■ The return of the classic arena shooter with a touch of modern genre design thrown in for good measure.

The balance of power has shifted

***Quake* is launching in a difficult environment.** While that name used to carry weight in the realms of arena shooters, id Software has been forced to recognise that the times have changed. Thanks to the ongoing success of *Overwatch*, hero shooters are now the defining experience for those that like their action to come fast and frantically, where true skill and positioning take precedence over intricate weapon customisation and assisted-firing systems. *Quake Champions,* then, is id's plan to build a bridge between the *Quake III Arena*-style of shooter and the hero shooter – a goal that's proving to have its fair share of successes and failures in recent beta tests.

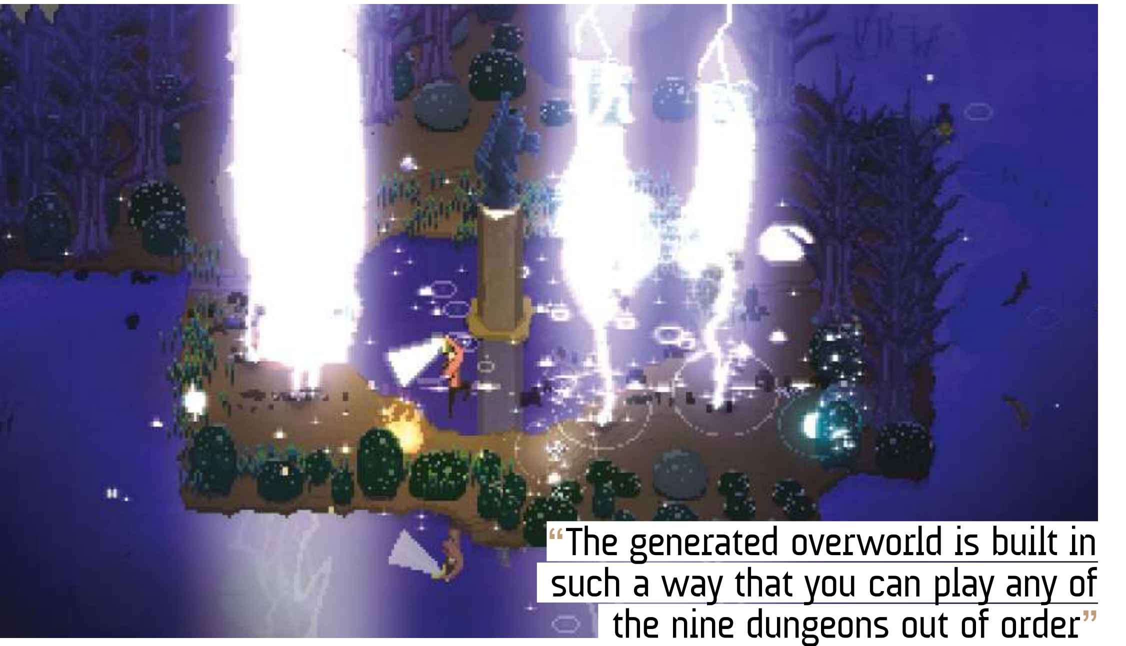
The core competencies are there and they still feel as amazing as they did back in 1999. Shooting in *Champions* feels as great as it always did, proving once and for all that the studio hasn't lost its touch for designing and executing a timeless style of FPS design. The seven weapons available to us were, in particular, a delight to wield; they felt defined and purposeful, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, forcing you to stay on the move and constantly be aware of pick-up times. At its heart, *Quake Champions* delivers everything you'd want from a game bearing the series' name, displaying a mechanical excellence that ensures its unconventional movement and fantastically bizarre map design complement each other perfectly.

Where *Quake Champions* struggles, however, is with the implementation of its hero characters. Id has opted to back away from the *Overwatch* style of design – whereby each hero has a defined and strict archetypal role – instead choosing to make each a vessel for personal play style expression. In a sense, it makes the heroes themselves feel redundant, like a conceit made to try and entice a modern audience – team composition doesn't have much bearing, nor does specifically attempting to counter particular enemy heroes. Where these heroes become a problem, however, is when trying to counter each character's ability. In an experience so readily defined by manipulating the environment and physics to suit your needs – on intricately learning the mechanics of the game – it can feel cheap to have your would-be kill deflected by a shield or avoided entirely by some otherworldly power. Finding a balance between giving players new strategic options without ruining the fluidity of *Quake*'s core experience is clearly something id is struggling with.

That said, *Champions* still feels excellent to play. While hero abilities can be frustrating, ultimately this is still a delightfully pure FPS experience. There's a lot to love about *Quake Champions*, so we can only hope that its heroes will receive notable tweaks and balances in the months to come as Bethesda pushes towards release.

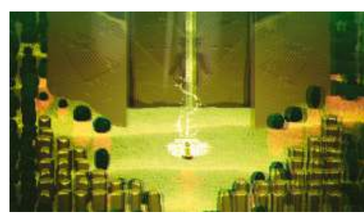


■ Above: *Quake Champions* is a an interesting return for the legacy franchise. While the baseline experience seems mechanically intact from *Quake III Arena*, the addition of hero characters (each bearing distinct abilities) doesn't feel like a natural inclusion.





Above: Just one developer has created *Songbringer* over the last two years, with the entire process archived on YouTube to help give fledging designers a window into the trials and tribulations to the process behind making original games.



"The generated overworld is built in such a way that you can play any of the nine dungeons out of order"

Songbringer

CONCEPT *Songbringer* takes inspiration from 8-bit and 16-bit classics such as *The Secret Of Mana*, *The Legend Of Zelda* and *Final Fantasy*, with the game changing every time that you play through it.

The power of one

Adventure begins with a unique six-character code. *Songbringer* is procedural, but not in the way that you might expect. There are over 308 million unique environmental combinations in this beautiful action RPG, and the world you receive is born from your very first decision in its embrace. When starting a new adventure you are asked to input a random six-letter code that will then generate a unique world dynamically and deterministically – a unique space that can later be shared with friends should you remember the combination. The result is an adventure that is never the same for any two players, unless you want it to be, of course; it's an opportunity to enjoy something that feels unique and tailor-made just for you, while still ensuring that friends can revel in the likes of secret hunting and speedruns together.

Songbringer is being built by Nathanael Weiss, a one-man development outfit dubbed Wizard Fu Games. The entire development of the game was streamed from start to (eventual) finish on Twitch – catalogued on YouTube in over 500 videos – creating a lesson in the challenges and enjoyment to be found behind the game design curtain.

Thematically, *Songbringer* immediately invokes the challenge and joy of *Hyper Light Drifter* – each built around precision sword-swinging and lightning-fast reactions as sullen synth waves thunder through your setup's speakers – whilst still offering an experience that seems to owe a debt to the earlier *Legend Of Zelda* adventures. It's a style of game that has become so popular in recent years that it's essentially carved out its own genre – retrograde aesthetics bound to a familiar, yet challenging, design ethos. Where *Songbringer* tries to distance itself from the pack, however, is through its open and nonlinear world design, with your overworld conquerable in any fashion that you see fit – you don't even need to pick up the sword, should you be interested in a nightmarish challenge. The overworld is built in such a way that you can play any of the nine dungeons out of order – tough, multilayered areas in which you'll encounter strange puzzles, tough enemies and beautifully designed bosses to battle against.

While *Songbringer*'s design is familiar, it's also somewhat mesmerising to play. The movement and motion of hero Roq Epimetheos seems almost hypnotic when guided by your hand, the twisted pixel-art futurescapes are a beauty to behold and an ever-present challenge to tackle. It's fun and the handling is tight, again proving that one developer with passion and perseverance can too often create an experience that feels as mesmerising and engaging as any other triple-A production.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Wizard Fu Games
Developer: In-house
Release: 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Nathanael Weiss, the sole voice behind studio Wizard Fu, took to Kickstarter in 2015 to fund his procedural action-RPG and debut, *Songbringer*. While Weiss asked for a humble $9,000 he eventually walked away with $15,000 from 759 backers to make dream come true.



While it doesn't yet have a release date, *Songbringer* is expected to arrive later in 2017. Players should expect to get plenty of value for money as it offers literally millions of game worlds to scour across thanks to a unique procedural design.



MORE INSTEAD OF BIGGER

One of the biggest updates *State Of Decay* is getting with this sequel is to the size of the game world, but rather than just extending the sandbox, Undead Labs has opted for three different levels, each the size of the original game's map. Why do this? Well, the team feels that even in a larger sandbox environments can start to feel samey and familiar. With three large, but defined stages it can offer more variety in location type, resource availability, types of shelter and so on. Sounds like a fantastic solution to us.

State Of Decay 2

CONCEPT Co-operative zombie survival gameplay gets another spin from the Undead Labs team, this time taking advantage of Unreal Engine 4 tech.

The family that survives together...

We were beginning to get a little tired of the permadeath survival trend a while back, but it feels like long enough now that *State Of Decay 2* may be coming about just in time to take advantage. There's something to be said for a game that asks you to live in the moment more than immerse yourself in the lore and history of a world. It's not terribly important to us why a zombie apocalypse has taken place in this game, so much as how on earth we're going to keep ourselves going for a few more days.

That's a style immersion that we've come to appreciate more and more. There can be something rather draining and all-encompassing about the backstories and spider-webbing plots of all of these sci-fi and fantasy worlds we enjoy, so the down and dirty undead survival experience of *State Of Decay* makes for a nice palette cleanser. We can set aside concerns over story and narrative choices and focus entirely on systems, resources and mechanics. In some ways, that's gaming in its purist form.

As it stands, *State Of Decay 2* is looking to build on its previous success with bigger worlds, more features, and the all-important addition of co-op gaming. Now, let's break this game down a little more with the most recent updates.

SURVIVE TOGETHER

Playing *State Of Decay 2* with up to three other players was top of the Undead Labs wish list as it started production on this title. While other survival experiences have erred towards MMO experiences, *SOD2* is standing firm in offering something more contained. The more focused experience – a tight team of friends playing against nothing but AI enemies – is what this team wants to build on, and that's fine by us. The chaos of those other titles is fine, but this should allow for more considered and fulfilling gameplay in the longer term.



"The down and dirty undead survival experience of State Of Decay makes for a nice palette cleanser"

BUILDING A STORY

To help give you an even greater sense of your impact on the game world, a new dynamic narrative system is being added to this sequel. That should mean that you see even more evidence of how your decisions and actions in the game are effecting the wider world through interactions with NPCs. The survivors will give you much more feedback now than before and allow for a greater sense of story than before. With the persistent world also being dropped from the previous title (that saw the world change while you weren't playing) you should feel a much greater sense of authorship over your own experience.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Undead Labs
Release: TBC 2017
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Undead Labs was founded by Jeff Strain in 2009, after founding ArenaNet and working as lead programmer on *World Of Warcraft*. Strain brought his online infrastructure and design experience to his new studio in the pursuit of a zombie survival experience.

High Point

State Of Decay is the first and only game released by Undead Labs so far, but given that so many potential partners had been asking for a *WOW*-style MMO, just finding it a home with Microsoft was quite an achievement. The sales since have cemented that success.

Developer History

State Of Decay **2013 [360, PC, Xbox One]**



Sparc

CONCEPT ■ Dodgeball meets *Tron: Deadly Discs* in this innovative and chaotic full-body virtual reality game from CCP Games, the creators of *EVE Online*.

It's time to bring the pain

This is the game virtual reality has been desperately crying out for. It's the system seller that doesn't yet exist; a unique experience that could work on the VR platform, and yet still simple enough to grasp that even the most casual of gamers could jump in and immediately find the fun. At its core, it is as intuitive as *Wii Sports* and as easy to understand, but look a little deeper and you'll find a nuanced game that relies wholly on reflex, skill and determination. *Sparc* is VR's first full-body sport and it's an experience that everyone, should you be willing and able, needs to try for themselves when it launches later in 2017.

This is CCP's first game based outside of the *EVE Online* universe – quite the feat considering the company is celebrating its 20th anniversary. And to add to the festivities, the company has taken the expertise and learning that it has acquired through the development of the *EVE: Valkyrie* and *Gunjack* projects and applied it here, to a virtual playground that effortlessly replicates the intensity and chaos of *Tron*'s iconic Disk Wars. Okay, so, somewhat unsurprisingly, CCP isn't keen on the *Tron* comparison, but we just call it like we see it.

To the company's credit, *Sparc* is *Tron*'s Disk Wars meets real-life Dodgeball. It pits two players against one another in a long, neon-lit corridor, each has a ball and the objective is to strike your opponent to score, either by hitting them with your own projectile or deflecting theirs right back at them. You can use your hands to catch or slap a ball back to its sender in real time, while a one-charge shield attached to your arm can offer a moment of respite should you have a lapse in concentration.

Sparc is able to work so successfully because of the accurate body tracking that the VR headsets can now offer. It uses the room-scale technology of Vive and Oculus Rift – though it will later be coming to PSVR – to give you full control over your character. It means you can quite literally leap and weave out of the way of speedy incoming projectiles and drop to your knees to make last ditch ducks and catches. It relies entirely on your reflexes and coordination because – much like *Tron*'s disks – the balls in *Sparc* don't fly merely in straight lines. They bounce, ping and ricochet off of the walls and ceilings of the arena, pushing you to be constantly aware of the position of the two projectiles whipping through the air towards you at insane speeds.

It's so impressive, how effortless everything feels. Your movement within *Sparc* feels like a natural extension of your body. The experience is raw, but it finds success in its simplicity. It works because it is centred wholly on natural momentum and body motions; the way in which you flick your wrist or whip your arm has a real and immediate impact on the way and speed that the ball moves. A single button needs to be held to catch an incoming projective, a move that not only offers a moment of respite but also recharges your shield – otherwise destroyed on impact – though we are told this deflection mechanic will be switched off on tougher difficulties.

Ultimately, when you're facing off against another player in this space – able to taunt and tease the player into making mistakes or laboured movements in real time – *Sparc* just clicks together. It's exhausting and it's challenging, breaking a sweat isn't a threat but inevitability, but there's a real magic to the underlying elements. CCP is calling it a 'V-Sport' and we can already see its potential. It takes just a few minutes to get you ducking a diving around, learning new ways to spin a ball and tactics to time the rebounds in such a way that your opponent gets battered from both balls simultaneously. *Sparc* is going to breathe new life into VR, an experience that demonstrates the power and potential of virtual reality in the most simple and convincing fashion imaginable.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Vive, Oculus Rift, PSVR
Origin: Iceland
Publisher: CCP Games
Developer: In-house
Release: 2017
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Formed in 1997, CCP Games is the overseer of all things *EVE Online*, the emergent sandbox experience that sees players engaging in politics, espionage and trade negotiations on one giant shared server. Recently, the company has branched out into creating innovative VR experiences.

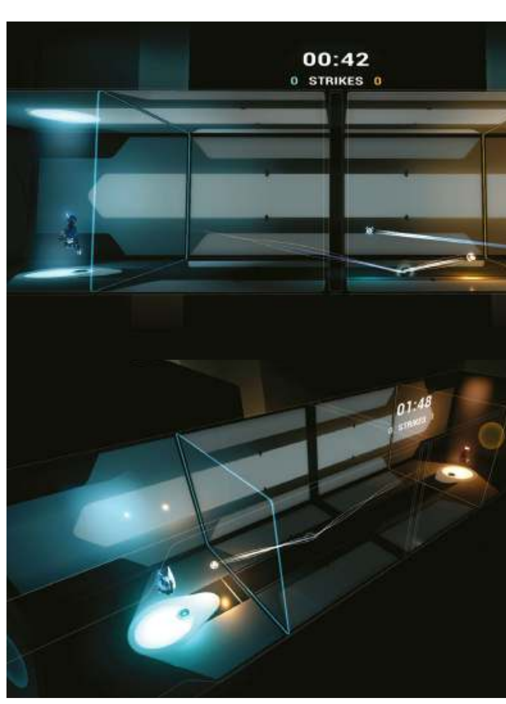
Developer History

EVE Online **2003 [PC]**
DUST 514 **2013 [PS3]**
EVE: Gunjack **2015 [OR, PSVR]**
EVE: Valkyrie **2016 [Vive, PSVR, OR]**

High Point

EVE: Valkyrie was a turning point for virtual reality, its look-to-lock missile system is a genuine evolution for any game that wants to present combat from within a cockpit.





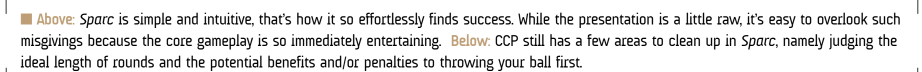
■ Above: While *Sparc* does get hectic, you can be safe in the knowledge that you can't be hit from behind. So if you dodge a ball, it'll simple rebound off of the wall behind you.





SPECTATOR SPORT

CCP Games is hoping that *Sparc* can become the first very real virtual sport. Due to its inherent simplicity and easy-to-understand premise that also makes its incredibly easy to watch as a spectator, bringing the same engagement and splendour to gaming that we first witnessed in *Tron* so many years ago. The way in which CCP is hoping it will catch audiences attention is by offering an in-built spectator mode, letting players not only watch over a game in action – in VR – but also interact with potential players while it's happening, letting you lay down a coin in an effort to later claim the space once a game concludes. It's an exciting time for *Sparc*, and we're eager to see how it develops.



Above: *Sparc* is simple and intuitive, that's how it so effortlessly finds success. While the presentation is a little raw, it's easy to overlook such misgivings because the core gameplay is so immediately entertaining. Below: CCP still has a few areas to clean up in *Sparc*, namely judging the ideal length of rounds and the potential benefits and/or penalties to throwing your ball first.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON


1


2


3


4


5

OOBLETS

Format: **PC, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Double Fine Presents**
Developer: **Nonplayercat**
ETA: **2018**

1 It's extremely difficult to talk about *Ooblets* without drawing very particular parallels. It's a shame, because the game looks and feels so unique – and is so largely enjoyable to experience – that it does deserve to stand on its own merits. And yet, here we go: *Ooblets* is *Harvest Moon* and *Animal Crossing* meets *Pokémon*; it is *Viva Pinata* cast in Portland, Oregon. It is also mad. *Ooblets* is a delightful game that takes the battling and training of *Pokémon* and wraps it around farming. You don't catch critters, you grow them; you cultivate their powers and set off into the world to make friends, fight others and swap tips.

KNIGHTS AND BIKES

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Double Fine Presents**
Developer: **Foam Sword**
ETA: **2017**

2 This is going to be one of the standout releases of 2017. After an opportunity to get hands-on with an early build of the title from Foam Sword and we've fallen in love. *Knights And Bikes* looks to recreate the playfulness of our childhood years gone by. Ness and Demelza are on adventure, the duo off exploring a gorgeous reimagining of a sleepy English town from the Eighties. A co-op experience at heart, it features light combat with confidence to fall back on exploration and competitive play between the two girls – playful vignettes that reflect the wandering attention of children lost in a world of their own.

BATTLE PRINCESS MADELYN

Format: **PC, Xbox One, Switch, PS4**
Publisher: **Casual Bit Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2017**

3 *Battle Princess Madelyn* may owe a huge debt to *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, but that's okay with us as it's a delightfully challenging adventure that respectfully pays homage to the past whilst keeping an eye towards the future. Following young knight in training, Madelyn – who just so happens to be inspired by creative director Christopher Obritsch's own daughter – and her ghostly pet dog, Fritzy, as they battle through some dangerous arenas of death, *Battle Princess Madelyn* delivers true Eighties platforming gameplay and it is glorious. An Alpha build is currently available on Steam and is well worth the investment.

EXO ONE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Exbleative**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2017**

4 This movement and momentum personified, a serene concept that sees you navigating uneven alien worlds as a small sphere, using gravity to induce motion before launching off slopes and inclines, transitioning into a flying saucer shape that soars through the clouds. It's rough around the edges, but the core concept is solid; once you understand the basics of the momentum and physics systems you'll find yourself entering into a trancelike state of concentration, becoming focused on maintaining motion across landscapes. It's difficult to know how it will fair out in the wild, but as an experience in interactive creativity it's a must-play.

SUNDERED

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Thunder Lotus Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2017**

5 While the retro aesthetic has been worked to death, there is still something captivating about seeing games such as *Sundered* in action. Its striking art forms an emotional connection with your attention, while the procedurally-generated Metroidvania presentation is only too comforting. Thunder Lotus Games is drawing from a variety of influences in an effort to modernise *Sundered*, and we can only imagine that fans of *Shovel Knight* and, dare we even say it, *Dark Souls*, will come to appreciate its challenging combat, not to mention a brutal upgrade system that forces you to forsake your life and die to attain fresh skills.



PS4
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7
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WIPEOUT IS BACK


Only On PlayStation



THE SPLATOON 2 DEVELOPMENT LEADS SIT DOWN WITH GAMES™ TO REFLECT ON THE MASSIVE SUCCESS OF THEIR WII U DEBUT AND TELL US HOW THEY PLAN TO SET A NEW BAR FOR THE SHOOTER ON SWITCH

While it's a team that managed to create one of the most successful new IP launches in the history of Nintendo (with nearly one in three Wii U owners picking up a copy of the game), the *Splatoon* leads are an incredibly humble bunch. They've been touted as the new faces of Nintendo, with a different outlook from their highly-respected and legendary forebears at the company. It's a group that delights in playing western shooters (as you can read later), but grew up playing Nintendo's own releases. It's a team that is ready to move beyond the established roster of Nintendo IP to strike out in new directions and create icons for a new era. But all of that would mean nothing if they hadn't connected so quickly with *Splatoon* and even they seem unsure how that happened so fast.

"The first big reaction we got was when we made the announcement at E3 2014," *Splatoon 2* producer Hisashi Nogami recalls. "At the time, the 80-second trailer we showed was edited by Director [Yusuke] Amano and team, and was produced to explain *Splatoon*'s game elements in a way that's easy to understand at a glance. But we got a good response for the art too, such as the characters or music."

What spawned from that was something very similar to the phenomenon we saw with *Overwatch* a little while later as just the character and world design alone began to inspire gamers around the world to create



their own art and designs in this space. The *Splatoon* community was emerging out of nothing and the game was still nearly a year away from being released.

"*Splatoon*'s art is essentially just something to bring the gameplay to life, so although the backbone of the game's setting is there in our minds, we don't present it in such a detailed way in the actual game," continues Nogami. "However, that may be exactly what stirs up the imaginations of creative users."

We have to admit that when *Splatoon* first appeared, we were sceptical of Nintendo making a move into the online shooter arena. As a company, it has not had the greatest history with online connectivity and in terms of design, *Splatoon* felt completely at odds with everything we understand a shooter to be. But we couldn't deny it had something about it. There was a cool factor that reminded us of *Jet Set Radio* and that couldn't be denied. And at its heart *Splatoon* had a clear and concise intent that remains the driving force behind its sequel.

"Personally, when we were making the first trailer for E3 I felt certain that if this was shown at E3 then lots of people would be interested for sure," says director Yusuke Amano. "I was confident in the characters for this IP and in the possibilities for gameplay those characters created. And one more reason is that when we presented the new squid characters to Mr Miyamoto he seemed quite happy with them »



We've already seen one new weapon added to the game, the Splat Dualies, and we're expecting to see many more bring some more depth and variety to your loadout before you begin painting the levels pink and green.

[laughs]." And while Shigeru Miyamoto was famously quite critical of the *Splatoon* experience in its early concepts, it's easy to see why he would turn around on it once the squid mechanics and mission statement of the game began to emerge.

"When we originally made *Splatoon*, we wanted to make something that would get more people into playing games," Amano explains. "So coming from that starting point, we first looked for which parts the people who played the last game really liked, and then made decisions on what we should change and what we should leave as it is accordingly.

"So that people would enjoy it even more, we came up with new gameplay ideas for how the Inklings could move around, and added these to the game after deciding how we could express them within the *Splatoon* setting."

One of the reasons why it's been exciting to watch the rise of *Splatoon* is exactly because it appears to have appealed to a swathe of gamers who have felt excluded or put off by online shooters in the past. Whether it's the non-lethal gameplay or the child-friendly, colourful world, *Splatoon* was a way for both lapsed shooter fans and new players alike to reconnect with the genre. That we also got to play an insanely fun and ever-expanding game only helped to keep everyone hooked. In order to build on that the team set out some clear goals for what *Splatoon 2* to achieve, as Amano explains.

"For *Splatoon 2* we tried to do the following: increase the opportunities for the players, including the development staff, who enjoyed *Splatoon* to interact more with each other; add more gameplay that makes use of the exciting abilities the squid characters have; further delve into the world and setting created for the original game and stimulate the imaginations of the players; make it so that people who enjoy the game want to tell others even more about the fun they have.

"With this I hope that the game will be something that can get even more people to play *Splatoon*, play it even more, and have more fun doing it."

> **"WHEN WE WERE MAKING THE FIRST TRAILER FOR E3 I FELT CERTAIN THAT IF THIS WAS SHOWN AT E3 THEN LOTS OF PEOPLE WOULD BE INTERESTED FOR SURE"**
> YUSUKE AMANO, DIRECTOR

"Creating a sequel means that you have a chance to change something," explains director Shintaro Sato. "We considered what kind of changes we could make that would make the game more fun and get people to like *Splatoon* even more. We aimed for something that would feel fresh, but also feel like *Splatoon*."

To that end *Splatoon 2* is expanding as much as it's changing what made the original shooter so popular and the addition of co-op mode Salmon Run is a prime example of that. "Getting into intense competitive play where you have winners and losers is certainly one way to enjoy *Splatoon*, but I think that *Splatoon* should also be able to give players lots of other kinds of emotions, too. We developed Salmon Run as the most straightforward way to communicate this to lots of people," Amano explains. "Of course this is a game so you can win or you can lose, but we went through a lot of testing and changes of the overall design to make sure that even if you lose you still have fun and want to play it again. We also included lots of things in Salmon Run that will make you want to then go on to play competitively." Those things include the opportunity to play with different types of weaponry, being able to practice your shooter skills in a less competitive and forgiving environment and winning yourself items that can be taken back into the competitive multiplayer arena. It's a natural evolution for *Splatoon*, drawing influence from the kinds of third-person shooters that it is now competing with. Salmon Run is essentially *Splatoon 2*'s Horde Mode, although with its own unique, squiddy flavour as you defeat Chums and collect Golden and Power Eggs to win. "Unlike other games, the different things you can do in *Splatoon* aren't simply found in a UI Menu," adds Amano. "They exist in the world your character actually runs around in, as part of the setting with an

COULD VOICE CHAT RUIN SPLATOON 2?

With online chat being added via mobile app we asked the developers if they were concerned

One of the many reasons why *Splatoon* managed to attract such a loyal and evangelistic fanbase is that it was a community without communication online and that by extension meant it was a shooter without toxicity. Unlike *Call Of Duty* or *Halo*, you could play *Splatoon* without fear of being told rather graphic details of your mother's extracurricular activities or having your sexual orientation brought into question in rather homophobic terms. But *Splatoon 2* will be adding voice chat through the Switch's Online Lobby & Voice Chat app, so does the team at Nintendo have any concerns that may damage the game's friendly reputation?

"*Splatoon* is basically designed as a game you can enjoy without direct communication," *Splatoon 2* director Yusuke Amano tells us. "The reason we included voice chat this time is because we wanted users who already know each other to enjoy the game more deeply using a communication tool that's linked to the game. Basically the same environment as the previous game has been preserved, so there is no need for concern."

"Voice chat can only be used when playing with someone you know, such as in private matchmaking; voice chat with someone you don't know in random matchmaking won't happen," producer Hisashi Nogami assures us. Sounds like they have it in hand, which is good to hear.

■ *Splatoon 2* looks absolutely brilliant on the Switch, whether blown out big on your TV screen or popping in all its radiant brilliance on the console's native screen.





■ Has Nintendo ever had characters as trendy as the Inklings? These guys have quickly become one of the great icons of Nintendo's catalogue of heroes.

actual reason for them to be there. By adding Salmon Run in such a way, we're hoping to give the world of *Splatoon* more depth."

A big part of adding that depth is also delivering a more involved and integrated single-player experience, something that was one of the original game's few real shortcomings. "The player's moves, stage features, and elements to keep you coming back have all been expanded considerably," says Amano of Hero Mode. "Naturally, the story and accompanying visuals that pull the player in will also make not only first time users, but also users that played the last game, love *Splatoon* even more.

"At any rate, all elements have been densely and deeply upgraded. However, the way that you could clear stages at a good pace in the last game hasn't been changed, so we designed it overall so that each user can play the game in a way they will enjoy."

On top of that you can expect greater integration of unlocks from single-player, multiplayer and Salmon Run according to Sato. "You can utilise in multiplayer mode the things achieved in Hero Mode even more than the previous game, and conversely you can also utilise in Hero Mode what you achieve in multiplayer mode, so please look forward to that," he explains.

"UNLIKE OTHER GAMES, THE DIFFERENT THINGS YOU CAN DO IN SPLATOON AREN'T SIMPLY FOUND IN A UI MENU"
YUSUKE AMANO, DIRECTOR

But, of course, the core of the game is still playing online and most specifically playing online with friends. To this end voice chat via the Switch's dedicated communications app is being added and private game lobbies are coming to the game. Both welcome additions although it's worth bearing in mind that the chat service will become restricted to Switch online subscribers as that service goes live towards the end of the year. What these additions also mean though is that *Splatoon 2* could find itself to be far more attractive in the competitive gaming eSports world, something that was already beginning to happen with the original game.

"In Japan we had an offline tournament, Splatoon Koshien that was held twice between 2015 and 2017," Nogami tells us. "There was a total of around 1,400 »

competing teams, 5,600 players, making it amongst the largest gaming tournaments in Japan. The participants weren't only core gamers, but came from a diverse range of groups, such as family teams or teams of just school kids. But as the tournament went on, we saw more high level, intense matches and the audience, as well as those watching the online stream, got very excited. Also, the audiences in the regional tournaments held in eight places across Japan, as well as in the national tournament in Kanto, came not only to just watch the matches, but so that they could meet and socialise with other *Splatoon* players. This experience made me realise that *Splatoon* wasn't just fun as a competitive game, it also had the power to be the centre of a user community." Something like the addition of Private Battle Spectator View to private matches for *Splatoon 2* speaks to that, allowing us to participate as spectators on a friend's match, but also opening the game up for broadcasting purposes.

"We weren't necessarily thinking specifically about eSports, but we worked to strengthen the kind of features that can help such a user community compared to the last game," adds Nogami. "However, these are additional features aiming to draw out the potential of the game, we didn't need to make big changes to the actual game itself."

Neither does the team really need to change much about how it approaches post-launch support for the game. While expanding multiplayer and looking to become more appealing to a pro-level gaming base might mean a real upshift in output from some other development teams, the *Splatoon* crew has already shown it is more than willing and prepared to keep its game alive long after release. The constant flow of content and fan events for the first game on Wii U was one of the reasons why it managed to stay in our consciousness even though



■ According to the development team the Inklings were created as a direct result of the gameplay mechanics being explored feeling incompatible with the rest of the Nintendo roster, so it's a little odd to them now to see the Inklings appear in games like *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*.





NINTENDO ORIGINALS

What have been Nintendo's most recent, in-house developed, new IP other than Splatoon?



CODE NAME: S.T.E.A.M.

Developer: Intelligent Systems
Release: 15 May 2015

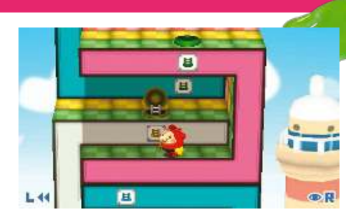
The Intelligent Systems team might be best known to you as the developer of *Fire Emblem* and *Advance Wars*, but this was a pretty decent merging of turn-based strategy gameplay with a third-person shooter feel.



STEEL DIVER

Developer: Nintendo EAD, Vitei
Release: 6 May 2011

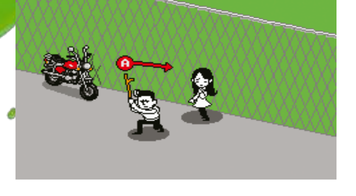
This highly-experimental game started life as a tech demo for Nintendo DS, but it evolved into something better with time. The core mechanics of controlling a submarine with nothing but the touch pad remained impressive throughout that process.



PULLBLOX

Developer: Intelligent Systems
Release: 8 December 2011

Another smaller release from the *Fire Emblem* team (also known as *Pushmo* in the US and *Hikuosu* in Japan), *Pullblox* is all about pulling blocks. Enhanced greatly by its 3D effects, you had to pull around the stage to save the kids at the top.



RHYTHM TENGOKU

Developer: Nintendo SPD
Release: 3 August 2006 (JPN-only)

The beginning of Nintendo's quick-fix rhythm action series that has spawned three sequels since this initial release, *Rhythm Tengoku* has been a massive critical hit since the start. It's inherited the *WarioWare* crown as far as we're concerned.





it was on a system that was losing relevance with each passing day. It's not surprising then to hear that the team is already making its plans for later this summer when *Splatoon 2* launches.

"I believe *Splatoon* is a game where the value includes the experience of the live expansion of its content," says Nogami. "It's not simply a game that's over after buying it on the release day and playing through all of that content. I also believe this helps boost communication between users and so the community of users will grow along with the content." And this apparently comes straight from their remembrances of playing games as children. "In my personal experience when I was a child, videogames weren't a toy for solo play; we swapped tips such as strategy advice with friends, or exchanged opinions on which items were strong, which characters we liked," Nogami adds. "They were at the centre of a community. I hope users will enjoy the experience of *Splatoon*, including how the game is the centre of a community."

"I BELIEVE SPLATOON IS A GAME WHERE THE VALUE INCLUDES THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LIVE EXPANSION OF ITS CONTENT"
HISASHI NOGAMI, PRODUCER

The evidence so far would suggest that's something *Splatoon* has already achieved, which is unique for a Nintendo game. While there's no shortage of Nintendo fans, many of whom connect with one another regularly, ourselves included, we've not really had a single game in which we could gather and connect before on a Nintendo platform. It's always been smaller, more intermit connections like Street Pass. However, the Nintendo Switch also happens to be a console that feels designed around connecting players and making multiplayer easier to share and the *Splatoon 2* team agrees that's the biggest way its game and the console complement each other.

"The main gameplay of *Splatoon* is, after all, online multiplayer; that hasn't changed since Wii U, and we're simply expanding various elements to make that experience even more fun," Nogami begins. "On the other hand, you can now take your actual Nintendo Switch, along with all your player data from playing online, out with you and go play local multiplayer with friends nearby. This experience of being able to go back and forth between online and offline without any barrier is unique to Nintendo Switch, which has both home console and handheld characteristics, and I believe it's something that expands the *Splatoon* game experience."

That all being said, we did wonder if the *Splatoon* team had considered simply porting the original game to Switch rather than making a full sequel. It had been rumoured that might be the approach taken and with new players being drawn in by a new console, it might have made sense to simply transition across in that way. "At the beginning, the team discussed whether to do a port of the previous game or to make a sequel," Amano reveals. "During that discussion, while talking about what we can do if we did make a sequel, our staff brought up so many ideas of what they wanted to do. When we put them all together, we decided we could probably do a sequel. In particular, this time the hardware has changed and you can take it out of the house with you, and new features using the network are possible (watching other matches, LAN matchmaking, linking to smart devices), so we can extend the range of gameplay. However this meant we were making almost everything new, and honestly I feel this pushed us down a difficult road [laughs]. We can't announce the details yet, but I hope you'll wait for further official news."

Right now the team is apparently focussed on making sure that when *Splatoon 2* launches on the Switch, a console that's already proving to be popular with a wider audience than the Wii U, it remains as open and welcoming to new players as to old hands from the last release. "We are actually thinking right now about how we can communicate the world of *Splatoon* to new players," Amano tells us. "Most important is how to show that interacting in lots of different ways with the people you are playing with is a really fun way to spend time. Of course, the development staff are also included within those people you are playing with.

"The development staff can't wait to engage with other users while actually playing the game once it's released. We are looking forward to increasing the possibilities of *Splatoon* even further after release."

■ A big expansion of Hero Mode should mean that the single-player feels far more robust and satisfying this time around while also acting as a great entry point for new players coming to *Splatoon* for the first time thanks to the Switch.



THE GAMES THEY LOVE

We like to ask game developers about the games they love and why, but we couldn't keep the Splatoon team down to talking about just one each...



YUSUKE AMANO

DIRECTOR OF SPLATOON 2



- **Battlefield: Bad Company** series (This may be the game that I spent the most time playing)
- **CoD: MW** series (I remember almost all of the *MW2* stages)
- **Limbo** (I played through it three times. Anyway, it's fun)
- **Diablo 2** (I played this all night with friends whilst at university)
- **Orange Box** (I would play *Team Fortress* all night)
- **Portal 2** (I played through it three times. I also played a lot of user content)
- **Hotline Miami** (I was completely addicted to it)
- **夕闇通り探検隊 – Yuuyami Doori Tankentai** (I played through it twice, I cried at the ending)
- **Kowloon's Gate** (It took a very long time, but I loved it, so I cleared it with sheer determination)
- **Planet Laika** (I was shocked by the player names. I still haven't forgotten)
- **Linda Cube Again** (The way they showed the story and the game system were original; anyway I love it)
- **Fluid** (During high school, I remixed the music and learned the pleasure of playing with music)
- **Um Jammer Lammy** (I battled with friends single-mindedly while I was studying at university)
- **Phantom Crash** (It may have had a heavy mental influence on me)
- **Steel Battalion** (I created a dedicated cockpit)
- **Rez** (Completed it while in that high that comes from pulling an all-nighter)
- **Jet Set Radio** (The adrenaline would hit me and I'd play the game all through the night)
- **Real Sound: Kaze No Regret** (It takes me back to that summer)
- **Another World** (I was astounded when I was in elementary school)
- **E.V.O.: Search for Eden** (I was astonished by the game content and setting)
- **Illusion of Time** (Even now I remember the story)
- **Bahamut Lagoon** (I learned the bittersweetness of life through the heroine)
- **Metal Max 2** (The game is fun and you just get drawn into that world)
- **Front Mission** (It's just cool, and the story deployment had an impact on me)
- **L.O.L** (A Dreamcast game. I cleared it somehow. That desert...)
- **Panzer Dragoon** (The world setting that doesn't reveal everything really affected me)

NINTENDO GAMES

- **Especially Mother** (I wrote an essay in high school with the first-generation *Mother* strategy guide)
- **Especially Perfect Dark** (I played all night in my university days)
- **Especially Blast Corps** (This was the first time I understood the centre of a game's structure)
- **Especially Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening** (It's perfect)
- **Lastly, Splatoon** (A game affected by my game experiences with all of the above games)

This is still not all of them....

HISASHI NOGAMI

PRODUCER OF SPLATOON 2

Narrowing it down to one is difficult for me as well, but I managed to narrow it down to three.

The first one is **Legend Of Zelda**, which I cleared about 30 times front to back. I did Time Attacks or cleared the game without obtaining the rings (items to reduce damage) in order to meet the green Princess Zelda. As you get the rings Link's colour changes from green to blue to red, but the Princess Zelda that appears in the ending has the same colour attribute as the protagonist Link, so in order to meet the green Princess Zelda, you have to clear the game in the default state/colour. This isn't meant to be an advertisement for it, but **Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild** has the same feel as the first game in the series and is really fun to play.

Virtua Fighter 2 is a game that I played all the time with game friends from work, both in the arcade and at home. I don't know how many hundreds of hours I spent practicing multiplayer and midair combos.

For about a year and a half, I went single-mindedly into the dungeons in **Diablo** once in the morning and twice at night searching for rings and swords. I met up with PKs (Player Killers) many times, but I'll never forget the kind person from Greenland I met just once by chance. I love games that allow me to be creative and find my own strategy or my own way to play. I don't just enjoy the content, I love discussing this and that with game friends about things that happen in-game, so I love games that allow for that.



SHINTARO SATO

PRODUCER OF SPLATOON 2

I love many more games than this, but everyone else wrote a lot and there isn't enough space, so I'll just name three.

LODE RUNNER

We had a copy of the Famicom version at home, and I preferred creating weird stages in Edit mode over clearing the provided stages. Now that I think of it, that may have been my starting point for making games. The stage I created that I liked most was a stage that had only one enemy robot at the beginning but increased to three robots after collecting all the gold.

AFTER BURNER CLIMAX

Back in my university days, there was a period when I was creating an original game and would be late going home. This game, which was placed in the game arcade in front of the train station, allowed me to stop thinking about everything and feel refreshed, so I remember I played one game every day. The moveable seat and blue skies on the game screen were impressive.

ORANGE BOX (TEAM FORTRESS 2)

When I had just found a job in Kyoto, I was playing until late at night with university friends who lived in Tokyo. I think this was the trigger for me noticing the appeal of shooter games based around completing an objective. The stage I loved most was Dustbowl.



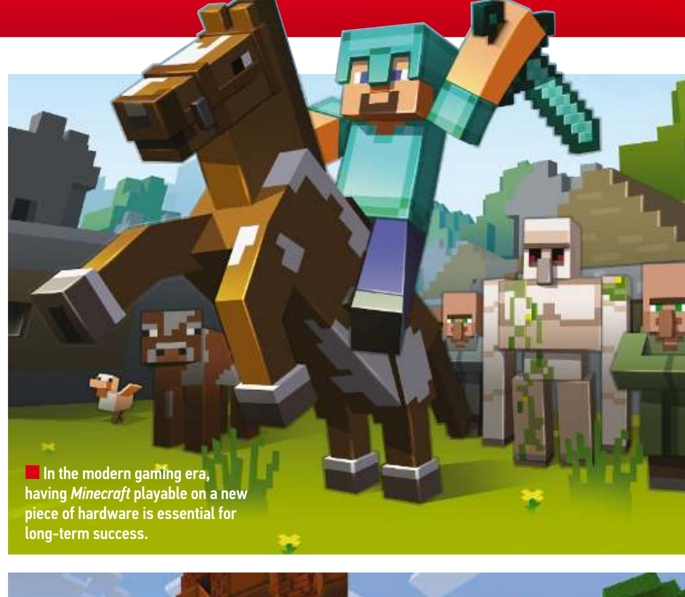
THE SUMMER OF SWITCH

THE LAUNCH WAS A SUCCESS, BUT WHAT COMES NEXT IS WHAT TRULY MATTERS. THESE ARE THE TITLES JOINING SPLATOON 2 TO MAKE THIS A SUMMER YOU'LL NEVER FORGET

By all accounts, the Switch has been already been a huge success for Nintendo. In the weeks following its launch on 3 March 2017, the home-console/handheld-hybrid has already made headlines the world over. It sold more units in its European launch weekend than any other Nintendo hardware in history. It secured the best two-day sales of any Nintendo console in North America and, impressively, has reportedly sold through 330,000 units in Japan in just three days – just shy of the Wii's original launch figures. Analyst Superdata claims Switch has secured 2.4 million system sales worldwide, ensuring that the system is on track to dwarf the Wii U before the year's end.

That's all hugely impressive, but console wars aren't won over a launch weekend; they are comprised of tiny battles cast across the initial launch window and long into the years ahead. Selling through a few million units of stock when the hype is high is easy, selling through the *next* million units of stock once the hardcore and early adopters have been placated, well, not so much. The Summer of 2017 will prove to be hugely important for Nintendo as it looks to lay the foundations down for the long-term success in the market. With *Super Mario Odyssey* still a ways off, and E3 likely to lay down the Winter line-up, **games™** looks to the next four months to see the ways in which Nintendo is kick-starting its handheld hardcore revolution.





In the modern gaming era, having *Minecraft* playable on a new piece of hardware is essential for long-term success.



MINECRAFT: NINTENDO SWITCH EDITION

DEVELOPER: MOJANG **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT **RELEASE:** 12 MAY

Minecraft is coming to Switch, and it's going to be *huge*. The mobile releases of *Minecraft* have always been somewhat underwhelming and *Minecraft*'s Nintendo Switch Edition is looking to change all of that – though it does come with a few caveats. Unlike the Wii U version, which only supported the Classic world type, the Switch version will come equipped with Classic, Small (1024x1024 blocks) and Medium (3072x3072) world types, although the Large (5120x5120) worlds found on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One have, sadly, not made the cut. This is being supplemented by eight-player multiplayer support online and the ability to take your crafted worlds with you on the move, joining up to four crafters in local multiplayer through both the TV and in tabletop mode. It's the portable mode that should have all builders excited, especially as Mojang confirms that it'll be running at a smooth 60FPS. You've played *Minecraft* to death, but this version sounds unmissable.

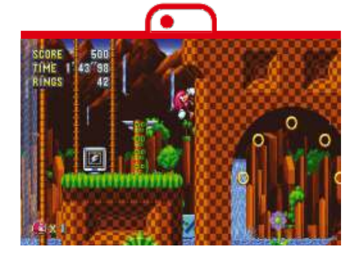


ULTRA STREET FIGHTER II: THE FINAL CHALLENGERS

DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
RELEASE: 26 MAY



Fighting fans rejoice, because one of the greatest iterations of *Street Fighter II* is back in action and coming to Switch this summer. *The Final Challengers* is bringing all 17 classic characters back to the streets, while introducing the title's first new fighters in close to 20 years as Evil Ryu and Violent Ken get involved in the action. The option to switch between HD and Classic graphics is a nice touch, as too is the addition of co-op buddy battles, though it's the ability to battle your friends in tabletop mode on the move that has us counting down the days until release.



SONIC MANIA

DEVELOPER: HEADCANNON GAMES
PUBLISHER: SEGA
RELEASE: Q2 2017



Take your first steps into the redux Green Hill Zone and immediately find yourself transported back to 1991. While Sonic never quite found his footing in the modern era, *Mania* is, seemingly, proof that he should never have left 2D behind in pursuit of 3D fame. From what we've played, *Mania* has been able to capture that special blend of intensity and precision platforming that the retro releases so dutifully offered. All eyes are now fixed on Tantalus Media, the studio handling the Switch port – responsible for bringing *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess HD* to the Wii U last year.



PROJECT MEKURU

DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PUBLISHER: OVER FENCE
RELEASE: Q2 2017

Here's a little known fact of the Wii U and 3DS: while it's all too easy to focus on the flagship releases (or the lack of them, as may sometimes be the case) some of the most entertaining titles are actually released under-the-radar on the eShop. *Project Mekuru* (a working title) looks to be an immensely fun puzzle game for those that have grown tired with *Bomberman*. Players compete by flipping panels in this action-puzzler, with the goal of taking over as much as the board as possible. It'll encourage rowdy multiplayer gaming, which is okay with us.



FATE/EXTELLA: THE UMBRAL STAR

DEVELOPER: MARVELOUS
PUBLISHER: XSEED GAMES
RELEASE: 21 JULY 2017



Following its release on PS4 and PS Vita earlier this year, XSEED's entertaining *Fate/Extella: The Umbral Star* will be making its way to Switch, coming pre-loaded with the 35 previously-released paid DLC costumes. *Fate/Extella* proved be a bit divisive at launch, but there's quite simply nothing like this frantic action game on the platform. While we do have a few concerns about how the framerate will handle in handheld mode – if the Vita version is anything to go by – we are confident the studio will work to properly optimise the title before its release this July.

ARMS

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EPD **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO **RELEASE DATE:** 16 JUNE 2017

Through the likes of *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* and *Splatoon 2*, Nintendo is demonstrating an uncanny ability to take tired genres and invigorate them with its signature charm and magic. The fighting game genre is up next, as Nintendo looks to unleash a *Punch Out* for the new generation; *Arms* may not look like much, but it has the beating heart of a champion.

On the surface, *Arms* looks and feels a whole lot like the boxing minigame that came as part of the *Wii Sports* package; it uses seemingly simple handheld controls to let you unleash over-extended hits and basic combos. It looks like a proof-of-concept for the antiquated motion control feature the company is still so eager to push onto its players. Go a couple of rounds, however, and the true genius of *Arms* is revealed.

Pitched alongside *Splatoon 2* as this Summer's biggest Switch releases, this new Nintendo IP is a hell of a lot of fun, layered with depth and strategy. The fundamentals are familiar, using a basic rock-paper-scissors design to ensure that throws beat blocks, blocks in turn beat punches and punches rush through throws – each executed with a simple jab of the arm. But it's the speed and chaotic, cathartic nature of Arms that gives it its flavour, and it isn't long before you are balancing movement and careful motion. Tactical play is essential – you'll execute counter-punches mid-air, before taking aim at specific enemy arms in an effort to make them temporarily limp, inviting the opportunity for moments of massive damage. *Arms* is kinetic, joyously so, with each short battle having a real energy about them.

Perhaps what makes *Arms* work so well is that many of the fights are fought at distance. Each of your arms – customisable and imbued with different power sets – are essentially weaponised slinkies, coiling out across the gorgeous, eye-popping arenas to strike your opponent. A little twist of the wrist will see it curl in the air, bringing a new layer of strategy to play, especially as you attempt to block and dodge the enemies' own curveball punches.



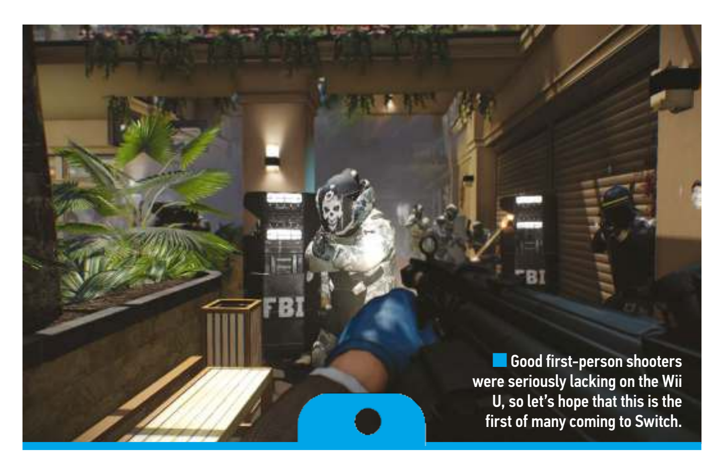




Arms is an arena fighter with a lot of heart, an unexpected delight in the Switch's roster of Summer releases. The motion controls themselves are simple but intuitive, a huge step above *Wii Sports*' boxing; fun and inviting, helping to get the blood rushing, though it'll be interesting to see how Pro Controller support impacts play at a competitive level. With its large array of unique characters – each with such a clearly defined personality that it can only conjure fond memories of *Overwatch*'s roster – and a surprising amount of depth and opportunity to its underlying systems, *Arms* looks on track to be another win for Nintendo.

TRULY PORTABLE

Nintendo has made the Switch truly mobile, offering a Switch Dock Set for £79.99. This additional dock essentially ensures you can push the console onto TVs at multiple locations without having to worry about packing up your existing dock, HDMI or AC power cables every time.



Good first-person shooters were seriously lacking on the Wii U, so let's hope that this is the first of many coming to Switch.



PAYDAY 2

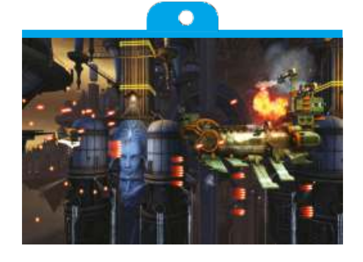
Developer: Overkill Software **Publisher:** Starbreeze Studios **Release:** Q2 2017

Of all of the announcements we straight up never expected to see? It's the release of Overkill's chaotically violent (not to mention entertaining) *PayDay 2* on a Nintendo platform. While it released back in 2013 for PC, *PayDay 2* has enjoyed a continued success over the years, thanks to its infectiously fun co-op and a steady stream of DLC content. Pitting you and up to three friends in some ludicrously challenging situations, it's your goal to plan, execute and escape from some of the craziest heists ever committed to a videogame. Given Nintendo's family-friendly image, we're a little surprised to see *PayDay 2* – the game is, after all, no stranger to courting controversy – but this has huge implications for the type of content we can expect to see in the future; Switch has been crying out for an FPS, and Overkill's excellent co-op shooter will be the first (of hopefully many).



EXTRA POWER

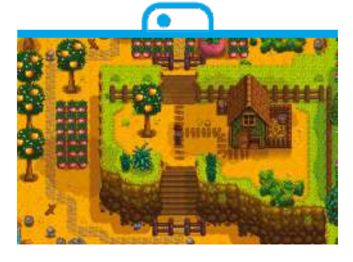
While the Joy-Con controllers have an impressive amount of battery life, Nintendo has delivered a solution for those that want to play for extended periods of time. These attachments give hours of extra juice to the controllers, so you can play for longer before reverting to handheld configuration.



SINE MORA EX

Developer: Grasshopper Manufacture/Digital Reality
Publisher: THQ Nordic
Release Date: Q2 2017

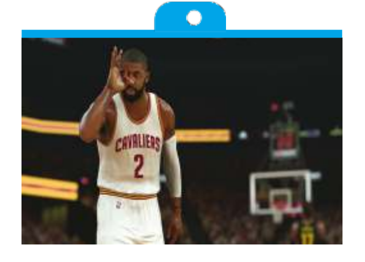
Sine Mora EX, the stylish shooter developed by Grasshopper Manufacture and Digital Reality is coming to Switch this summer, bringing the bullet-hell gauntlet shooter straight to your hands. The game – originally released in 2012 – has had a huge graphical overhaul as it makes the leap from PS3 to Switch. The new release offering crisper textures, improved stability and environments that really pop, though you will (admittedly) struggle to take notice of them, considering how fast the action moves. How this precise side-scrolling shoot-'em-up handles on the move will likely denote how essential it is.



STARDEW VALLEY

Developer: Eric Barone
Publisher: Chucklefish Games
Release Date: Q2 2017

With the mainline *Harvest Moon* franchise in disarray, *Stardew Valley* is the closest you are likely to get to a hugely entertaining, impossible to put down, farming RPG on a Nintendo console any time soon. *Stardew Valley* on Switch makes perfect sense, it's one of those games that constantly demands your attention – as you look to build up a farmland and life from ruin – and being able to take your creation with you on the move is nothing short of genius. As one of the best titles of 2016, getting *Stardew Valley* on Switch is without question an essential purchase.



NBA 2K17

Developer: Visual Concepts
Publisher: 2K Games
Release Date: Q3 2017

The release of *NBA 2K17* is hugely important. The release of annualised sports games has never quite taken off on Nintendo consoles in the modern era, with the likes of 2K Games and EA forgoing the Wii, Wii U and 3DS in favour of the Xbox and PlayStation systems. Third-party support is imperative to improving the vitality of a system and so *NBA 2K* will be a proving ground of sorts, it'll demonstrate the potential sports games can have on the system and, if it's a success, should lead to more arriving in the future – besides, tabletop multiplayer is designed for these types of end-to-end experiences.



THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

Developer: In-house
Publisher: Bethesda
Release Date: Q3 2017

Skyrim is set to be Bethesda's first major collaboration with Nintendo since the NES days and it's going to be *huge*. How *Skyrim* performs on the Nintendo Switch is still a mystery to all, even after its huge placement in the reveal trailer, but if the studio is able to properly optimise its huge open-world RPG for the system it will be a game changer. *Breath Of The Wild* is proof that these types of experiences can work in both TV and handheld formats, it's now down to Bethesda to demonstrate that third-party studios are also capable of engineering greatness on the portable platform.

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

EA

HOW DICE, MOTIVE AND CRITERION ARE COMING TOGETHER TO BUILD THE ULTIMATE STAR WARS EXPERIENCE

Star Wars Battlefront II is the most ambitious project that EA has ever embarked on. It's the biggest title in developer DICE's history, a chance to for Criterion Games to take centre stage again and a stunning statement of intent for Motive Studios, making its debut following its formation back in 2015. This year's *Star Wars Battlefront II* brings a grossly ambitious single-player concept together with a wildly expanded multiplayer offering to form – well, there are no two ways about it – the most important *Star Wars* videogame ever created.

While 2015's *Star Wars Battlefront* may have been born out of a desire to give *Star Wars* fans a chance to live out their own personal battle fantasies in a galaxy far, far way – cast across some of the most recognisable fantasy battlegrounds of all time – this sequel's ambitions are so much greater than leveraging nostalgia for sales. *Battlefront II* is looking to celebrate 40 years of *Star Wars* history by casting its net across all three cinematic eras of the universe, targeting fans young and old whilst giving us the opportunity to view the established canon through a lens that we've never experienced before – a new perspective on a hero's journey well travelled.

DICE is no longer content with merely letting you relive a handful of iconic *Star Wars* battles with your friends, instead it's going to make history and carve out its own piece of the sacred timeline. That makes *Battlefront II* essential for any fans looking to better understand what happened to Luke Skywalker, the Rebellion and what remained of the Empire in the 30 years between *Return Of The Jedi* and *The Force Awakens. Battlefront II* is going to touch on the original trilogy, the prequels, and the recently launched sequels, in a way that we never imagined. Like we said before, *Battlefront II* is the most ambitious project that EA has ever embarked on. That's a process that's as daunting as it is exciting for fans and studios alike, as we discovered talking with the development team.

"I came into *Star Wars* by watching the original trilogy, that's just how old I am," laughs Bernd Diemer, creative director at DICE and a loyal member of the German *Star Wars* fan club since 1984 – he even has the tattered membership card to prove it. Like many, Diemer's first contact with the *Star Wars* universe was through the trilogy that kickstarted with 1977's *A New Hope* but he – just like the rest of



Star Wars Battlefront II will feature a full single-player campaign, will support 40-player multiplayer battles, 24-player space battles and offline split-screen co-op, for those of you playing on Xbox One or PlayStation 4 Pro.

the folk at DICE, Criterion and Motive – recognise that this isn't necessarily the case for many today. The *Star Wars* franchise is so much bigger than the original trilogy, and the studios would have been foolish to overlook fans that identify with other corners of the universe. "The first time you see one of these movies it holds a very special place in your heart," Diemer muses, "and while old school *Star Wars* fans like myself might talk for hours on end over a beer about which movie is the best – and I don't think that question could ever be settled, but that's what we do of course because we are nerds – for a lot of people the prequels were the original touch point with this universe."

While the quality of the prequel trilogy might remain a hotly debated issue between *Star Wars* fans, those films have – along with the wildly popular *Star Wars Rebels* TV series – undoubtedly inspired a generation to fall in love with the universe, its characters and their stories. Well, one character and one story in particular. For Diemer, any lingering doubts he may have had about the decision to bring the eras crashing together in one game – a gargantuan undertaking from the studio in terms of asset creation and content generation – were immediately exorcised as it showed *Battlefront II* to the public for the first time. "Honestly, during the reveal at Star Wars Celebration, when we first showed off our trailer, the first time that Darth Maul showed up… just by the reaction in the room I thought to myself, 'I think we made a good call there'."

The reaction he is talking about is the moment thousands of fans erupted into fits of hysteria – there's something about that second lightsaber shard popping off that just gets the heart racing. But it wasn't the resurgence of everybody's favourite Sith apprentice – back in one piece, we hasten to add, as opposed to sporting those unsightly spider legs – that got the crowd going the loudest, for that would be awarded to the moment Motive Studios revealed the existence and the subsequent intentions behind *Battlefront II*'s all-new single-player campaign, an opportunity for players to get a little more insight into what occurred in the 30-year gap between *Return Of The Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*. An area that is, as Diemer puts it, "an amazing canvas to start imagining".

Mark Thompson, game director at Motive Studios – the subsidiary formed under Jade Raymond in 2015 in an effort to help drive home EA and LucasFilm's commitment to bringing new stories in the *Star Wars* universe to life in virtual spaces – is a little more pragmatic, although it proves to be difficult for him to contain his excitement. "It is a challenge, but it was kind of a fun challenge! This hasn't really been done before – we are exploring such a unique perspective."

In many respects, *Battlefront II* is making a bold move: it's attempting to tell a story from the perspective of the Empire, starring an Imperial who isn't necessarily evil or contemptible, but one that is struggling with loyalty and duty »

PALPATINE'S REVENGE

How will Star Wars Battlefront II span the 30 years between Return Of The Jedi and The Force Awakens?

Battlefront II's story officially begins with the destruction of the second Death Star, with Iden Versio and her squad of spec-ops Imperial officers deployed to Endor in an attempt to halt the Rebel assault on the shield generator. Where does the story go from there? Using the knowledge we have gleaned from *Star Wars: Aftermath*, *Rebels* and *Shattered Empire* (official canonical stories that both of *Battlefront II*'s writers cite as inspiration) we are about to take a guess at how this all connects. We are more than likely to be wildly off base. But, you know, just in case – potential spoilers start here:

You may notice the presence of Emperor Palpatine's voice in the trailer, a curiosity given that he died on the Death Star. That's because he is dishing out orders from the grave, putting Operation Cinder/ The Contingency into motion following his demise. This plan is delivered to specific, trusted, members of the Imperial forces by 'the messenger' – that'll be the red droid, or, 'Sentinel' – you can see addressing Iden on the bridge of a Imperial Star Destroyer. The Sith Lord's plan? To wipe all connection of Palpatine with the Sith off of the face of the galaxy and dismantle the last remnants of the Empire – a plan that leads us straight to *The Force Awakens.*

The first part of this plan involved the Empire setting up satellites around many planets, one of which is Naboo – Palpatine's home world where he once served as governor – in the days following the Battle Of Endor. The satellites then caused untold chaos, creating hurricanes across the planet, effectively flooding and destroying all of Palpatine's ancient Sith artifacts in the Naboo capital of Theed – which, we should add, has been confirmed as a map in *Battlefront II*'s multiplayer. The next stage of the plan not only ensures that members of the Empire continue to believe that Palpatine is still alive, in hiding, but it too allows him to put a vengeance plan into action. From here, high-ranking servants of Palpatine are ordered to eliminate non-essential personnel, troops, officers and Admirals, erasing all traces of the old Empire – which sounds like a job for a highly trained spec-ops team to us –before ordering the remaining few to flee to the Outer Rim in an effort to start up, you guessed it, The First Order. If Iden Versio and her Inferno Squad team makes it all the way through to *The Force Awakens*' timeline, you better believe they will have a hand in Luke Skywalker's exile and the formation of The First Order.





in the face of a crippling defeat. As the world crumbles around Iden Versio, the fierce special forces agent we will come to inhabit through *Battlefront II*, we will be given the opportunity to see the fall of the Empire, the rise of the Alliance and, given that the game spans 30 years, perhaps even the formation of The First Order. But it all begins with a defeat in earnest, one you will no doubt be familiar with by now.

"When you see the Death Star II explode in [*Return Of The Jedi*] it is framed as a victory," considered Thompson, speaking at Star Wars Celebration 2017, giving an insight into the 'moment of magic inspiration' that pushed Motive to explore a part of the established cannon that's still largely cast in shadow. "You see everyone celebrating and partying with the Ewoks on Endor, fireworks across Coruscant, and it's this big celebration for everyone. [But] what would it be like to be a Stormtrooper on the ground, to look up to the sky and see the Death Star II explode? For that to be a moment of loss, a moment of defeat… when you take off the helmet in disbelief, look up at the sky and immediately put that helmet back on with a new hardened resolve about how you need to take that fight back to the Rebellion. That was the starting moment for the story."

Motive began work on *Battlefront II* back in the fall of 2015, when *The Force Awakens* was still in cinemas and beginning a revival of

> THAT'S WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO WITH A GAME LIKE THIS, YOU HAVE TO GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON BOARD AND WORK TOGETHER TO DEVELOP A GREAT GAME.
> BERND DIEMER, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DICE

sorts for the *Star Wars* franchise in the public consciousness. While the original story idea may have arisen organically, sounding like a pitch formed between friends over a drink, but it was the 30-year gap that excited Thompson and writing duo Mitch Dyer (a former games journalist) and Walt Williams (known for his work writing critically acclaimed shooter *Spec Ops: The Line*) the most. "We were asking questions as fans and as developers," Thompson said. "You know, what happened in those 30 years? And so, we thought lets try and tell one of those stories that connects these two amazing trilogies together."

The difficulty for Motive here is that it wants to create a hero that can stand credibly alongside the likes of Luke Skywalker and Jyn Erso, despite working for a side that has been typically cast as 'evil' within *Star Wars*' clear cut black and white morality paradigm. While work was well underway on *Battlefront II* by the time *Star Wars: Rogue One* launched in 2016, the film's commitment to exploring a different side of the Rebellion confirmed to Thompson and the team that it was on the right track with its efforts on the single-player campaign. "The way it talked about [the] Rebels as extremists for the first time was really interesting," Thompson tells us. "*Rogue One* explored the grey areas of *Star Wars* morality, in terms of black and white, and we are kind of doing the same thing but from the Empire's perspective."

He is quick to note that Motive isn't trying to re-write history or cannon. It isn't attempting to convince anybody that the Empire was good, that the destruction of Alderaan was justified or that the creation of the Death Star was necessary, it's simply trying to "explore a unique perspective" by casting us in the boots of a character that grew up believing in what the Empire was trying to achieve in the galaxy. "An individual can have their own personal perspective, their own moral compass, and can believe in the Empire or some of the things that the Empire stands for but not necessarily believe that the Death Star was great or that Alderaan had to happen."

"So just that on its own is an interesting perspective, because usually the Empire is homogenised and dehumanised into ranks and ranks of Stormtroopers that we don't know as people – we don't know how they think. We are intentionally led to believe that they all believe in the same thing and they all blindly and obediently follow every order that they are given," says Thompson, adding, "having someone take off the helmet, to find out who these troopers are as people, that becomes interesting because we can talk about perspective and shades of grey rather than just the black and the white of right and wrong."

This will all be framed around Iden – voiced and captured by *True Blood* and *Sleepy Hollow* actress Janina Gavankar – and the »



Multiplayer in *Battlefront II* will now support classes, with DICE eager to introduce more structure and depth into the game. The studio is hopeful this will encourage players to band together, working in union to take down powerful heroes and overcome difficult objectives.

group of elite, special forces Imperial soldiers under her command, Inferno Squad. They are designed to be the heroes of the empire; the commandos that would inspire legions of Stormtroopers into battle, the elite pilots that would have children dreaming of one day joining the Imperial academies. Inferno Squad are the true leaders of the front lines, the ones left in charge as the Admirals were forced to deal with Darth Vader indiscriminately thinning their ranks and the numerous shadow plays from an Emperor attempting to play family councillor between the at war Skywalkers.

For Steve Blank, creative director of LucasFilm Story Group, the decision to create Inferno Squad was born out of the company's desire to bridge the gap between exciting gameplay and a compelling story. "We are making a videogame first and foremost. We wanted to find the right group of people that had the skill sets that would make sense in this game," he said, speaking at Celebration, giving us an insight into what type of gameplay we should expect from the campaign. "We knew we wanted to have aerial combat, we knew we wanted there to be ground combat and we wanted this character to be proficient at both. And then from a story perspective, who would be the most devout? [To] sit there and watch something like the Death Star II explode and go, 'I'm going to double down on this commitment to the Empire, this strengthens my belief in what we have and what the Empire stands for.' All of that combined really led to this idea of special operatives. People who have that type of training and have that type of belief and the skills to really pull that off. The marriage of the two is where Inferno Squad came from."

While details on the moment-to-moment action of this campaign are light, we do know that Motive is looking to let us live out this fantasy of being an elite trooper in this world. As an empowering hero through Iden, we will be given the opportunity to take part in 'epic-scale battles' across *Battlefront*'s classically open sandbox maps, but also be handed the chance to venture through quieter spaces and dense cityscapes. Iden's droid – a customisable ID9 Seeker Droid, first seen in *Star Wars Rebels* – will play a big part in gameplay, seemingly able to incapacitate enemies stealthily and issue other Imperial gadgets. This will be integral, we imagine, as we venture to planets and cities unseen, such a Vardos, an entirely new planet in the *Star Wars* universe that represents the utopian vision of the Imperial rule – this will be one such opportunity to bring a more condensed style of play into the fold, conjuring memories of 2005's *Star Wars: Republic Commando* more so than the chaotic mess of moving parts that defines the most recognisable of *Star Wars* battles.

Taking a story through the gap between *Jedi* and *Force Awakens* is one thing, but Motive piled more pressure onto itself. Iden isn't the only character you'll play as through this campaign, instead, just as you can in multiplayer, *Battlefront II* will also give you the opportunity to play as an established hero. That, Thompson tells us, took real collaboration between EA and LucasFilm. "I think we had as many opportunities as we did boundaries," he tells us. "The LucasFilm story group works in publishing, in comics, in anything that can tell a story – even if that's like a semi-interactive toy being developed by Hasbro. Everything for them has a story and so they can understand all of the different moving pieces; what's happening in the movies, what's happening in *Rebels*, what's happening in everything that isn't announced that they won't tell us about yet," he laughs, noting that LucasFilm was willing to hear out anything the group brought to the table, upfront about the difficulties that Motive may encounter with charting a course through this particular era. But one story decision was worth the debates, the time and the effort: the opportunity to pin a chapter around Luke Skywalker and give fans an insight into his movements following the fall of the Death Star II.

"They were willing to have a discussion about everything that we brought to the table, which was really, really cool," Thompson says. "It's just that sometimes they would give us that look which is to say, 'we can go down this road, but it's going to be a long road and it's going to involve lots of discussions' and sometimes it was worth it! When we decided that we wanted to have a chapter in the story playable as Luke Skywalker, that was one of those moments. They were like, 'look, this is one of our biggest characters, his story ark is still active and it's going to be difficult to tell a slice of his life in-between the events of movies that have existed for 30 years, and events of movies we don't know yet'."

"It's one thing to play Luke as a character in the multiplayer, but then getting to live out a slice of his life in the campaign was one of those challenges that we thought would be worth the time and the effort. LucasFilm story group are always fully supportive, but they let you know in advance just how difficult it is going to be," continues Thompson, adding, "This was one of those challenges that we thought would be worth it."





IT'S ONE THING TO PLAY AS LUKE IN THE MULTIPLAYER, BUT GETTING TO LIVE OUT A SLICE OF HIS LIFE IN THE CAMPAIGN WAS ONE OF THOSE CHALLENGES THAT WE THOUGHT WOULD BE WORTH THE TIME AND THE EFFORT.

MARK THOMPSON, GAME DIRECTOR, MOTIVE



Whether it will have been worth the time and effort remains to be seen, but the studio is certainly doing its best to deliver on one of the biggest fan requests following the release of the original *Battlefront*. This single-player campaign isn't a stapled on addition to curb dissent, but an opportunity to bring the videogames on a par with the comics, novels and TV shows as an integral companion to the films – trusted with expanding the lore and stories of some of the biggest characters in the world, whilst still building new heroes and tales for fans to enjoy.

"LucasFilm challenged us to step beyond recreating," says Diemer, who is quick to note that, while he didn't work on DICE's *Battlefront*, he was behind it every step of the way as a fan. "Look at Hoth, for example, it's a pixel perfect recreation. When you step onto that level, you really feel like you are there and I think that is a tremendous achievement by the studio. But how awesome would it be if we can start creating inside of this awesome universe?

"This is especially true for the campaign, we felt as if there was a lot of opportunity. If you look at how LucasFilm is trying to expand the universe through comic books, novels and even movies like *Rogue One* – which is based off of two lines in the crawl of *New Hope*. It's very interesting to see, because when you look at *Star Wars* it's a very big universe, but there are many, many spaces between each of the movies – these are these interesting places for creating new stories. These are the places that we can start filling [the universe] with our own ideas."

If the single-player campaign represents a chance to inject fresh ideas and new stories into the *Star Wars* universe, the expanded 40-player multiplayer could be seen as slightly more restrictive avenue for DICE, though it's no less of a creative opportunity. At its heart, the multiplayer component of *Battlefront II* is a chance for DICE to deliver more of a good thing; to bring the spectacle, drama and cinematic flair of *Star Wars*' most famous battles to player's hands across an array of gorgeous locals. We mentioned the decision to bring all three eras of the cinematic universe into this one package earlier and, ultimately, it feels like a natural evolution the foundations the studio first established back in 2015.

"It was a relatively easy decision," Diemer explains to us, reflecting on the decision to unite the universe together under this one *Battlefront* banner. "One thing that we realised is that, when we listened to our fans and also to our team, it was pretty clear that people wanted *more*.




Heroes and vehicles will no longer be controlled by pick-ups on the maps themselves. Instead, you'll now earn resource points in the game for playing the objective; cash those points in on playing as a hero or a trooper speciality class for a duration of time in-game.

So we started thinking, 'well, how can we deliver more *Star Wars?'* One way that we found to be very interesting is to bring more eras into the game, because then we were able to span – for the first time in an HD game – all movie eras. It [naturally] allows us to bring more stuff into the game."

That, of course, wasn't the only aspect DICE was interested in turning its attention to. As the LucasFilm group is no doubt aware by now, *Star Wars* fans have a habit of criticising and analysing every little detail, and they aren't afraid of being vocal about the results – DICE wasn't spared the same fate with *Battlefront*. In spite of its popularity – with EA reporting sales figures beyond the 14 million bracket – Battlefront was derided at launch for its 'casual' play, dearth of content and litany of performance issues that helped undermine the, frankly, stunning presentation and powerful audio design. In fact, **gamesTM** had this to say of the game back at review, stating: "Prolonged play is exhausting, with any and all searches for gameplay depth coming up empty. You cannot deny the quality here, but it's hard not to ask the question that so many others have been asking since launch: is this it?" *Battlefront* has one hell of a vocal community, something that isn't lost on Diemer and the team at DICE.

"Doesn't it just?" Laughs Diemer as we bring up *Battlefront*'s vocal fan base, in what has now become a useful exercise in managing fan expectation and studio ambitions. "It's good to have a lot of feedback.


While *Battlefront II* will be spanning all eras of the cinematic universe, trooper and starfighter types will be locked to their specific universes. That is to say, don't expect to see First Order Troopers storming Kamino or Super Battle Droids tearing it up on Jakku.



ALL WINGS REPORT IN

It's the moment we've all been waiting for, space battles are coming back to Battlefront

"Criterion are the *masters* of space battles," Bernd Diemer, creative director at DICE, tells us, citing how it needed the best in the business to make the space combat feel right in *Battlefront II*. "We realised a game of this scope and this ambition needs the proper support and talent associated with it. Criterion brings decades of experience on how to make fast things feel really good and blow up spectacularly."

You can cite content concerns, a legacy owed to *Star Wars: Battlefront II* (the original 2005 release, that is) or any other number of reasons for wanting galactic-scale space combat to make its way to *Battlefront II* (the new one, man this is confusing) but we know the real reason. It's because who here hasn't dreamed of screaming, "Lock S-Foils in attack position!" into a microphone only to see an armada of X-Wings behind you follow suit and spiral into combat against a flock of Tie-Fighters? And now, thanks to the work of Criterion Games, we will have that opportunity, as the studio – best known for developing the *Burnout* games – brings 24-player space battles to *Battlefront II*.

"In my head, when we are talking about *Return Of the Jedi*, it's these moments of epic capital ships and starfighters battling it out, that's going to be a significant part of this game's multiplayer," said Matt Webster, *Battlefront II*'s executive producer and general manager at Criterion, speaking at Celebration. While the company began small, developing *Battlefront*'s Speeder Bike mission before taking on December's *Star Wars X-Wing VR* experience, it now in charge of ensuring that the same love is given to the starfighters as the on-the-ground troopers. "We extend across all of the eras, so you are going to get to see prequel-era Vulture droids and First Order Tie Fighters. And those ships are going to mirror what we're doing with the troopers, so those ships are going to have different role types for the different ships and we have hero ships as well... because that is all a part of the hero's journey too."

> THE FIRST THING WE DID WHEN WE STARTED WORKING ON THE GAME WAS TALK TO OUR PLAYERS, AND MOST OF THEM DIDN'T WANT TO RELIVE THE EXACT SAME STORY THAT THEY'VE SEEN IN THE MOVIES OR ON TV
>
> PAOLA JOUYAUX, PRODUCER, MOTIVE

HERO PICKS

With Darth Maul, Luke Skywalker, Kylo Ren, Rey and Yoda already confirmed, we take a look at some potential heroes to join them for Battlefront II



ANAKIN SKYWALKER

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (2005)

We've experienced playing as an older Darth Vader and we've seen what he was able to do in this form both in DICE's *Battlefront* and, more recently, in *Rogue One*. However, with prequel characters making an appearance we wouldn't mind seeing a newly Sithed-out Anakin Skywalker stride into the fray.



MACE WINDU

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (2005)

We would hazard to suggest that adding Samuel L Jackson to any videogame is likely to improve it. We would love, for instance, to hear him offer expert commentary on *FIFA*. However, if EA were likely to put the actor in any project it would be this one where he would reprise his role as the purple lightsaber wielding, Jedi council badass.



YOUNG OBI WAN

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (2005)

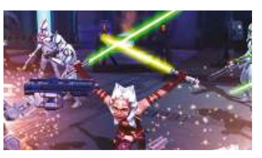
If we have to pick between young and old Obi Wan Kenobi we would be inclined to pick Alec Guinness' interpretation of the character, but for gameplay reasons we think Ewan McGregor's earlier incarnation of the Jedi warrior would be a better fit. Plus we get to re-enact the classic Obi Wan versus Darth Maul battle.



AAYLA SECURA

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (2005)

A firm fan favourite based on limited appearances in the prequel movies and some far greater fleshing out in the *Clone Wars* series. Her fame and popularity stems largely from her advanced skills with a lightsaber and her mischievous streak. The fact that she was voiced by the great Jennifer Hale in *Clone Wars* helps, too.



AHSOKA TANO

STAR WARS: GALAXY OF HEROES

The Padawan of Anakin Skywalker during the Clone Wars was one of the primary protagonists of the animated series whose tale may prove to be influential for the path of Rey in the new trilogy of films. Regardless, her advanced training in lightsaber duels and unorthodox style would serve her well in *Battlefront* if she appeared.



These voices are basically the same nerds that we have inside of our team as well. We have very strong opinions of what should be in the game and what should not, so it's actually very helpful to have a lot of feedback to see what players actually want."

Of course, the danger here is that studios can too often let creative control slip out of its grasp – or feel as if they are pandering to a fan base that thinks it knows what it wants. Thankfully, DICE seems to have addressed the problem areas, working to restore balance to the Force – nope – gameplay systems and depth in a way that makes sense: it's tapping into its legacy and proficiency in FPS system design through years of *Battlefield* excellence, making it more accessible (see also: streamlined) and bringing it to *Star Wars*' iconic battlegrounds.

This process begins with what Diemer calls "deconstructing *Star Wars*" or, to be more plain, the act of tearing apart the famous battles into their disparate components, done in an effort to build an experience that allows for emergent, player-driven experiences that feel heroic and cinematic. "What we identified is [something] that is very deep at the heart of *Star Wars*: that everybody should get the chance to be a hero," considers Diemer. Only in *Star Wars*, he tells us, could "a lowly moisture farmer become one of the most powerful characters in the universe…" well, when you look at it like that, he isn't wrong.

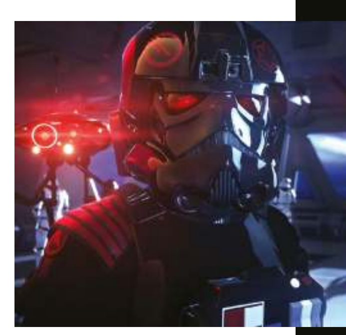
It's a nice sentiment, but how do you make even a lowly trooper feel like a hero when confronted by the likes of Kylo Ren, Obi-Wan Kenobi or Count Dooku? DICE's answer is team-play; in supporting structured and clearly defined class combinations, *Battlefront II* not only lets groups work as cohesive units, but the studio is able to answer criticisms levied at depth and customisation in the same breath.

"We wanted the troopers to have a fair chance of standing up against a hero and one of the good methods that we found was team play. Having classes is such a good way for gamers to form teams themselves naturally, and to form their own personal group that is perfect for going up against certain heroes. That also meant that we wanted to give a little bit more ways to personalise your own trooper, so that it becomes a little bit more like its own character and not just like a faceless shell that you slip into."

By including a 'diverse and powerful progression system' *Battlefront II* shrugs off one of its predecessors biggest problems: there will be more to play with here than an array of Seventies haircuts and interchangeable blaster types. This applies to everything, from the basic troopers, to the starfighters, to, yes, even the heroes – with new abilities unlocked the longer you sink your teeth into the game.

This has also necessitated a change in the way heroes and vehicles are handled. Pick-ups in the game have been removed, replaced by a resource system that DICE believes will stop the culture of token spawn camping and give each player the opportunity to feel like a powerful hero in the world. "We wanted everybody to have a chance of becoming a hero that is a little bit more universal, so we decided to introduce a resource system where we can give you points by doing things that are not only kills," says Diemer, noting that they will be awarded for everything from defending capture zones, subduing heroes and claiming valuable areas – whether you're in *Battlefront* or *Battlefield*, playing the objective pays dividends. "You get to decide when you are going to spend that currency on becoming a hero or entering the battle in a star fighter, or an AT-ST Walker, or as a special," he adds, indicating that special trooper types will be available in game – such as a Clone Trooper with a jump pack – designed to bridge the gap between iconic heroes like Darth Vader and normal troopers, to give you a taste of the power that could be yours with a little dedication and focus.

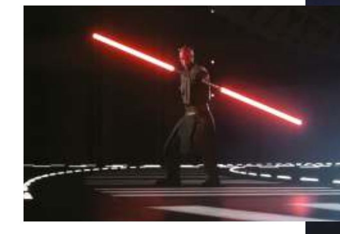
When you look at the entire package, *Battlefront II* looks like a genuine attempt to answer fans, thank them for their patience, and deliver the ultimate *Star Wars* experience in return. Between the wildly ambitious campaign, the introduction of space-combat and a refined multiplayer experience, *Battlefront II* looks like it's going to be an essential purchase for anybody that has ever dreamt of visiting a galaxy far, far away.



Sadly, DICE wouldn't be drawn on the return of everybody's favourite game mode from 2005's *Battlefront II*, Galactic Empire. Believe us, we tried.











POE DAMERON

DISNEY INFINITY 3.0

Since space battles are making a big leap forward for *Battlefront II* – and we're confident hero pilots will be joining the fight as a result – it only makes sense that one of the best we've ever seen in the *Star Wars* universe would join in. Poe Dameron is a pretty incredible fighter and will surely fare well in this new arena.



FINN

DISNEY INFINITY 3.0

Lovable Finn's current state in the *Star Wars* movie series is unknown, but he took a bit of a beating at the end of *The Force Awakens*. Regardless we expect a fully-fit Finn to make an appearance in this game, perhaps even sporting his helmetless Stormtrooper look. That might make for some interesting identification issues in the heat of battle.

EVE ONLINE

FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

GAMES™ IS INVITED TO MEET THE MOST CHAOTIC COMMUNITY IN ALL OF GAMING. JOIN US AS WE ATTEMPT TO GET BEHIND THE POLITICS AND THE PEOPLE OF EVE ONLINE AT FANFEST 2017

On 7 April, 2017, hundreds of pilots, bleary eyed and strangely energised, could be found holding position in the cold after hours of organised conflict. These world-weary travellers had been drawn here, to an area known by the designation of 'downtown Reykjavik', to play their part in an annual ritual dubbed Fanfest. And still, as the night grew darker and colder, they stuck shoulder-to-shoulder with friend and foe alike, coming together to stand against a shared threat – that of common sense.

Flash back to eight in the evening. Dignitaries bearing CCP call signs could be found rallying the masses, ensuring a determined effort on the part of the pilots to huddle together and see this night through to its inevitable, messy conclusion. There was CCP Falcon, sat atop his 'Aluminium Throne', kickstarting the evening with determination and thunderous music; then there was CCP Seagull, stood above the masses on a table, brandishing a bottle of 'The Black Death', rallying her group into the night with an impassioned war cry.

Flash forward to one in the morning. There he goes, one legendary member of the Council Of Stellar Management – the democratically elected government that presides over New Eden, providing a direct line of communication between the players and CCP – dancing manically through the streets, initiating trade deals and brokering alliances in the cold embrace of the Icelandic night, all the while loosing his mind to the sultry embrace of a dissociative anaesthetic. Or so he tells us anyway, it's difficult to know for certain; you never quite know what to take at face value in this environment, because as we came to discover, everybody has their role to play in *EVE Online* and the lines between fantasy and reality are too easily blurred in the space-bound soap opera.

This battle isn't to take down a corporation – like so many of the stories that you've no doubt heard trickling out of *EVE Online* over the years – but to drink the city dry. Because *EVE Online*, as everybody is so quick to tell us, is the only game in the world where another person will take every single thing that you treasure, burn it down right in front of you, and then laugh about it with you over a beer later. You see that adage in action here at Fanfest, because the only thing that CCP and its loyal pilots care about more than interstellar misdemeanours is drinking. Day one of three at Fanfest is where the conflict, the camaraderie and the drama of *EVE* is dragged down from the stars and out onto the streets. From the outside looking in, we were here to find out how CCP's MMO was able to function, let alone thrive, in the face of so much inherent chaos and bad behaviour.

So, what is it that drives a game like *EVE Online*? It's a question many have asked and failed to answer. Because even now – after 14 years of active duty – it continues to exist as something of a curiosity. For all intents and purposes, *EVE* sits just outside the purview of the wider gaming sphere. It plays by its own rules as the rest of the world turns dutifully, only occasionally surfacing to embrace industry trends as a means to an end – as was surely the case when developer CCP Games transitioned its game into a free-to-play model early last year.

EVE Online is by no means the most popular MMO in the world, but it is its most infamous. An unscrupulous approach to

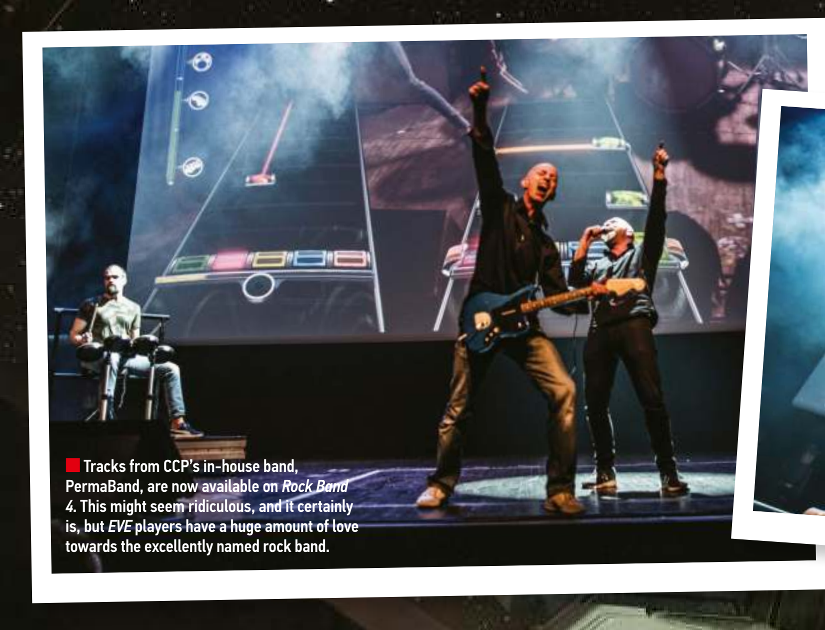


> "I LIKE TO THINK ABOUT EVE AS AN ONLINE DISTRIBUTED, ASYNCHRONOUS, PERSISTENT, BOARD GAME AND EVERYBODY THAT PLAYS IS STANDING AROUND THIS ONE TABLE."
> **ANDIE NORDGREN, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

sandbox design and enforcement has allowed a maw of debauchery to not only emerge but thrive under the watchful eye of CCP. It has created an atmosphere that leans wholly on a balance between trust and betrayal – fuelled by friendship and rivalries – and the studio is only too eager to encourage this activity on both sides of the scale. The result is an environment that's given birth to some of the most energised player-driven narratives and emergent moments of chaos gaming has ever seen. And at the heart of each of those stories is a player.

The most devoted of them come the world over to visit Fanfest, the yearly celebration of *EVE Online*, hosted by CCP in its native Reykjavik, Iceland. It's an opportunity for fans to come together and meet the pilots they spend so much time flying side-by-side with and the rivals they spend so much time attempting to screw over. For the most part interactions are cordial, but on occasion thousand-player battles – with huge monetary implications for both sides – have been known to spark at Fanfest and erupt online; one particular story is told to us often, of one faction leader bitterly insulting a rival's wife, with vengeance later enacted in the stars. Huge pushes for territory are known to take place while Fleet Commanders are in flight to Iceland, or otherwise distracted by the lights and noise of the Keynote speech – used this year to highlight an array of graphical updates and new content coming to the game in 2017 – one such attempt was made this year, we're told, but quickly shut down by dedicated and designated players who sit out Fanfest to protect their alliance's assets. »

all photos Brynjar Snaer / CCP Games



Tracks from CCP's in-house band, PermaBand, are now available on *Rock Band 4*. This might seem ridiculous, and it certainly is, but *EVE* players have a huge amount of love towards the excellently named rock band.

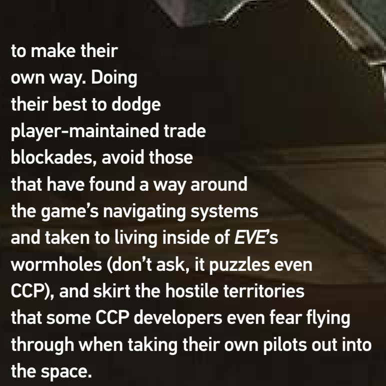


In spite of the madness, at its core, *EVE Online* is still just a game like any other. It has basic mechanics and systems, all wrapped around a cosmos made up of 7,500 interconnected star systems that form New Eden; a starship (with an attached real-world monetary value) needs to be financed in-game, built and requisitioned to navigate between them all. A bit of a joke in the community, *EVE* has often been known as the game that's more interesting to read about than it is to play – something some of the team are even happy to acknowledge. "Moving stuff between places isn't necessarily fun. It doesn't sound like it when I try to explain it to somebody that doesn't play *EVE*," says Edvald Gislison. "I'm just hauling stuff between star systems and they are like, 'oh so you're like a truck driver?' 'Well, yes but…' but they just don't get it! If you're hauling something really expensive, your heart is racing the whole time. It's the only game where you can almost get a heart attack from a PvP encounter. When you get in your ship and, when you get into a situation where you could lose all of your stuff, your heart just starts racing, because the feeling of loss is so real in it. There's no respawning or losing a few points or anything, you are losing something directly tied to you it's like your property," he says, thinking for a moment before adding, "It's like *Mad Max: Fury Road*, but in space… that's what I should tell them."

One fleet commander tells us that you should never "drive anything that you can't afford to lose" and it's easy to understand why. In the practically lawless environment CCP has fostered around that basic design, players are free to make their own destiny; filling in roles of miners, pirates, journalists, mercenaries, bankers, brokers and everything in-between. In *EVE*, players can work alone or in player-formed corporations and alliances that can be as small as just a handful of hopefuls, though the largest is comprised of tens of thousands. Each and every one of them has their own agenda.

"They just wanted to ruin the experience for everyone. They were just going to ruin the game and be the dickheads of *EVE*," continues Gislison, better known as CCP Quant, who holds the position of data scientist at CCP. "We had been loud about not wanting to intervene in anything. [*EVE*] is a sandbox and anything was allowed, you can scam if you like and, yeah, you can grief people. They just took that as a challenge," Gislison continues, discussing the formation of player-built coalition The Goonswarm, the federation formed under the legendary Mittani – the man (at least partly) responsible for much of the newsworthy drama that's emerged out of *EVE* over the decade. "They wanted to destroy the game, but they haven't succeeded. They've just made it better. Players have been trying to destroy *EVE* for a long time… but none have succeeded… It's a part of what makes *EVE* what *EVE* is."

The reason? Resilience. While many may spend hours a night actively trying to break the game, every player we encounter has a deep-rooted love and respect for *EVE*. It attracts a certain type of person – "you need to be thick skinned and you need to have the confidence to trust anybody and everybody to get a job done, no matter how many times you get burned," one miner turned mercenary tells us, still exhausted after her flight in from Sydney, Australia – although many spend their time in New Eden simply trying



to make their own way. Doing their best to dodge player-maintained trade blockades, avoid those that have found a way around the game's navigating systems and taken to living inside of *EVE*'s wormholes (don't ask, it puzzles even CCP), and skirt the hostile territories that some CCP developers even fear flying through when taking their own pilots out into the space.

EVE's executive producer Andie Nordgren believes it's this shared space that makes the game so attractive and unending, thinking of it as "an online distributed, asynchronous, persistent, board game. Everybody that plays *EVE* is standing around this one table, and care about the same game setup that has been active since 2003. And that's a big difference from almost every other game," Nordgren continues, surprisingly sprightly considering the last time we saw her she was under the moniker





Fanfest sees thousands of players coming together, many of them in cosplay, looking to bring the virtual lives they spend thousands of hours building into our reality.

> I THINK A BIG CHUNK OF EVE'S DESIGN IS BASED AROUND DISRUPTIVE GAMEPLAY, WE HAVE VERY FEW RULES
>
> PAUL ELSY, COMMUNITY MANAGER

of CCP Seagull, passing a bottle of Brennavin and drinking tokens around amongst players in the street the night before. "It's a big part of what makes it unique, that everybody plays on the same board. If you tell me you play *EVE* I know that we have something in common, even if we have never met before."

And that thing that they all have in common? They've probably been ripped off, blown up or screwed over. It all comes down to trust; many of the very best stories from *EVE* emerge out of an instance of deceit or betrayal, and that is only able to exist because very real bonds are formed in this game. Some players will happily talk of the millions of ISK (the in-game currency) that they had acquired by gaming the economy or the huge fleets that they had commanded, but ultimately it always comes back to trust. *EVE Online* couldn't exist without it.

"We of course expect the craziness now," admits Nordgren, but she's quick to sing the praises of the player base as it exists today. "But the reason that all of these stories emerge about betrayal is because they are actually exceptions… the relationships that people build are real and the trust they build together is real. Because almost every time there is trust between players in *EVE*, not betrayal, and that's why it becomes news when there is. That's what makes the relationships real, because there is always a real choice to betray or to not betray in a sense."

When we take this idea of trust to *EVE*'s community manager Paul Elsy he is quick to smile, he knows – perhaps better than most at CCP – how powerful a bond of trust and betrayal can be. "I guess you could call me a pain in the arse," he laughs, the community manager ran as a famed pirate in the game for a decade, making his millions by playing the market and ripping people off, before joining CCP. "It's still strange some times, seeing things from the other side of the fence after being a player »

FINDING HUMANITY IN A UNIVERSE OF DEPRAVITY

CCP MADE EVE'S FANTASY A REALITY WITH THE KYONOKE INQUEST, A LIVE INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE

EVE Online is a unique experience, a fascinating game that produces some of the most interesting and alarming stories the industry has ever encountered. That, however, can too often clash with the baseline experience itself – a slow and ponderous game that doesn't often live up to the expectations these stories set. At this year's Fanfest CCP engineered a story of its own, putting pieces in play before letting players run wild with them – a live action role-playing experience in collaboration with production company The Company P.

Dubbed The Kyonoke Inquest, CCP asked players to work together across three days to determine the fate of H4-RP4 Kyonoke Inquest Center, a Keepstar-class citadel gravlocked to a quarantined backwater Astral Mining facility in the Federal system of Postouvin. The actions of attendees would decide the outcome of the station, the result reverberating through the real world and back into the world of New Eden. It was an ambitious project to say the least, and one that seemed to grab the hearts and attention of many in attendance.

Not only did it provide players with something to do other than drinking – something CCP is seemingly obsessed with – but it also gave them an excuse to cross corporation lines and work with other players, regardless of allegiance or alliance. It's here where you see the potential of LARPing to intertwine with *EVE*. It's the natural extension of the game's strange reliance on player-built economies and politics. What's truly surprising was the outcome; *EVE* players are notorious for the joy they find in death and destruction, so it was a shock to see that, after three days of activities, selfies and costume-enhanced antics, all in the name of science, the Fanfest attendees opted for mercy. In choosing to distribute a cure to the infected colonies, the *EVE* players showed a new side. Whether this is reflected in the brutal moment-to-moment interactions of New Eden is anybody's guess.



CCP'S FUTURE IS IN VIRTUAL REALITY

Between the release of *EVE Gunjack* and *EVE: Valkyrie*, CCP has already demonstrated its appetite for creating unforgettable VR experiences. *Gunjack* worked well to showcase the potential of mobile VR, while *Valkyrie* – with its excellent look-to-lock missile system – continues to be one of the very best VR games available on Vive, Oculus and PSVR. CCP renewed its commitment to the space at Fanfest, revealing a huge update to *Valkyrie* before giving **games™** the opportunity to get hands-on with an all-new VR game behind closed doors.

You can read all about *Sparc* back on page 26, but it's also worth drawing attention to *Valkyrie* as CCP Newcastle continues to push boundaries in the dogfighting space. The most recent update brings a new map, Solitude, to play and introduces in-atmosphere ground-level skirmishes. It's incredibly impressive, sweeping through tight passageways and across wide snowy open areas all the while trying to engage in one-on-one dogfights aligned with the horizon. It's an intense experience and shows that CCP is not content with leaving *Valkyrie* be; the company still has a long ways to go to sell the title to the average gamer, but it's clearly one of the best experiences available to anybody lucky enough to own a VR headset.

As is customary at Fanfest, the event closed out with the 'Party At The Top Of The World', which was this year headlined by none other that Hodor from *Game Of Thrones* on the decks and CCP's PermaBand as the closer.

for so long… now I have to try and be one of the good guys, which is difficult!"

"I think a big chunk of *EVE*'s design is based around disruptive gameplay," Elsy continues, last seen the night before sat on top of a throne constructed out of crates of beer, better known as CCP Falcon to the community. "We have very few rules, the rules that we do have are very strongly enforced and we take them very seriously, but generally we try to stay as hands off as possible. It's very rare that we will actually intervene."

An example he gives is of a player deciding to open a bank back in "2008 or 2009, that was when there was the big *EVE* bank scam," he tell us, joyously recalling the time an 800 billion ISK Ponzi scheme almost crashed the in-game economy. "He ran this bank for a year and then he just closed the bank, took the money and vanished. There were people who just accepted they had been screwed over and moved on, and then there were people who were like, 'CCP, what are you going to do about this?' And we just had to be like, 'well, nothing!' He didn't break the rules. You trusted a guy with your assets and ISK in-game and you lost them… that's a fact of life, every day is a school day."

"We are very big into sandbox gameplay. The best stories of *EVE* come from emergent behaviour. It's give and take, an action and reaction. And the best thing I love about it is that it's all emergent, there is no script. It's all just player behaviour and I think that's what drew me to it back in 2003. I can just go, log in, and create my own story – just by speaking and interacting with other people and you don't really get that feeling in many other places."

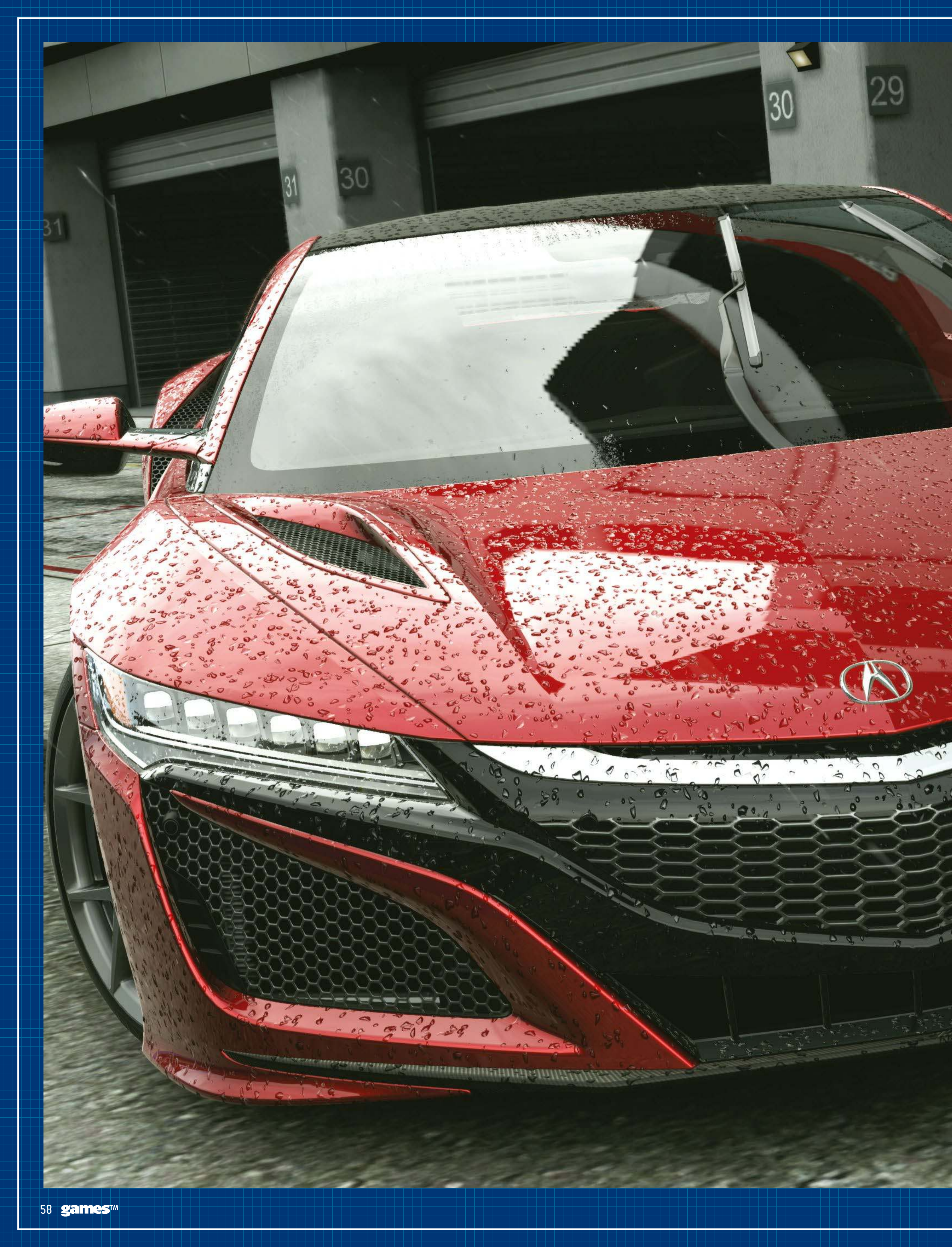
That, in essence, has ensured that *EVE* is essentially a microcosm of human activity. The game has been studied by academics and by economists, interested in testing financial and political models in a reactive player-driven world. In a universe where every resource, friendship and eventual betrayal can be tracked, *EVE* offers a new and interesting way to understand and view the social systems of our world. This too can have very real implications. To these players *EVE* is more than a game, more than a hobby, it's an intrinsic and important part of their lives.

Jin'taan, a legendary fleet commander and member of the Council of Stellar Management, takes responsibility for the virtual lives of thousands. Playing at the highest level doesn't mean that he's become apathetic to loss, however. "You're not just losing your own stuff you're losing your friends' stuff. I've had stress dreams about losing fights. I've cried over it. I've done research into it and most fleet commanders are sociopaths."

"*EVE* is a microcosm," says Xenuria, another member of the CSM. "It's more than just a game – it's also my own personal petri dish where I can try out things that might not be appropriate in the real world," he says, noting that it's an area where he feels comfortable testing out new ideas after struggling with being on the spectrum. "*EVE* might not be able to improve the world; but it can improve the people who play it. *EVE* gives people a chance to experiment socially in a structured environment and you can always walk away from it. From that perspective it's a great place to try new things and to learn about yourself. It's a world in miniature." Although Jin'taan would describe it differently, "It's a third-world monarchy simulator online, it's so good."



Fanfest is a strange event in that very little occurs. While keynotes and presentations run all day, the real fun is to be made meeting other players. Members of various corporations travel from across the world to meet their friends, and it isn't uncommon for truces and trusts to be made and broken at Fanfest.



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A New Wave Simulation?

PROJECT CARS 2 AIMS TO BLEND SIMULATION WITH REALITY TO AN EXTENT NEVER SEEN BEFORE

Many racing games claim to have mirrored reality, but the eventual reflection is typically far from accurate. From cars that feel as though they're floating above the track, to those that drive like they're glued to it, fantastical marketing slogans are rarely delivered upon.

Project Cars 2, then, has set itself a particularly tough target in its goal to be so realistic that "professional drivers can drive in a way that matches what they've done in real life." These are the words of Ron Chong, COO at UK-based Slightly Mad Studios and a man sporting a beard so sharp that it looks as though it's going to cut straight through his glasses at any moment. Clearly, he's a man with a razor-edged vision.

One of the ways Chong and his team are making sure they stay true to their lofty realism goal is to bring in professional racing drivers. This is par for the course for any racing game with serious ambitions in today's game development world, but Slightly Mad is spreading its net a little further than most in its attempts to capture those with top-class vehicular talents.

Mitchell deJong is an X Games gold medallist in the rallycross discipline (more on that later) as well as being a serious presence in the eSports motor racing field. He's also just 19 years old, which is sickening news for anyone born before the launch of the original *Gran Turismo* and whose trophy cabinet is decorated only with broken dreams and failed attempts.

"We wanted to have people on the team who really understand what these cars are and how they need to be driven so that they can tell us whether we're doing a good job or not," Chong says in explanation of his team's professional racer picks. "We told them that we wanted a perfect simulation, and that's the angle they are looking at the game from.

"The way things have worked previously is that dedicated sim [eSports] drivers have tended to be faster in racing games than actual professional drivers. That's because they learn all the tricks they need to perform in order to drive fast in a game setting.

"In *Project Cars 2* we've managed to get parity between the real and sim worlds because it's so realistic and because of that we think this is a very innovative moment. Our tyre model, for »

■ **Visually, *Project Cars 2* is a step up from its predecessor, but it's the improvements under the hood that set Slightly Mad's sequel apart.**



Cockpit cam remains the most immersive way to play, the claustrophobic interiors of high performance cars adding an extra level of presence and drama.



Rallycross vehicles are difficult enough to learn how to handle without the added pressure of driving across snow and ice.

instance, has evolved to the point where a racing driver can come into one of our cars, on one of our tracks, and they can be as fast, or faster, than a highly decorated eSports champion."

We've not had the opportunity to witness deJong put his experience of both the real world and the simulation to the test in *Project Cars 2*, but his presence alone is a keen indicator of how serious Slightly Mad is in its quest to mirror reality. The studio could have quite easily recruited a more recognisable name to act as marketeer and 'ambassador', but instead they've gone with the guy who knows two racing worlds, largely isolated from one another, inside and out. This decision acts to both reassure interested fans of the game's goals and further ramp up the expectation of those most dedicated and knowledgeable about the racing world.

Fortunately, the original *Project Cars* (2015) provides a solid foundation upon which to build. The game was widely praised on release for its focus on helping players improve their driving skills and providing a simulation that was without the baggage of superfluous game modes or a career structure that forced you to race town cars before you got to the truly aspirational machines.

The visible features of the original aren't, according to Chong, the only benchmark from which *Project Cars 2* can draw strength and inspiration, however. Upon *Project Cars*' release there remained room under the hood for tinkering and tuning an engine that the development team were initially unfamiliar with.

"Our physics engine and the technology that underlies *Project Cars 1* is quite advanced and in some cases, such as with the tyre modelling, it's so advanced that we had to learn how to use it properly," Chong tells us.



Project Cars 2 is a challenging game, one that asks you to take into account and overcome a wide variety of obstacles. Heavy rain is one of the more obvious hurdles to be bested.

> "[Rallycross features] psychotic vehicles that make you forget everything you know about driving"



Rallycross asks you to master and indulge a very different set of skills to those required for traditional circuit racing. Be prepared to forget everything you know.



"Essentially, what we wanted to do is take the simulation technology, and our new understanding in how to use it, to come up with new experiences and have *Project Cars 2* be a truly worthwhile new purchase. Other games are not something we're looking at or comparing ourselves to, we're looking at real life and trying to match ourselves to that.

"We want to grow *Project Cars* and make the best sequel possible. For us that's not about adding new cars or tracks and maybe the odd new feature, because that's really just more of the same and that's not enough as far as we're concerned. We want to give our community of sim racers and car fans some completely new experiences."

Car handling, certainly, feels different than it did in 2015. Of the most common criticisms levelled at the original game was the questionable implementation of the control pad, the general consensus being that Slightly Mad had prioritised racing wheel owners over the much larger demographic of those without such expensive peripherals.

Here, playing on a control pad is a much more sensitive experience. The slightest nudge of the analogue stick one way or the other results in the car gently sliding from one side of the track to the other, allowing for much subtler movements when it comes to overtaking and positioning your wheels for the next corner. At first this greatly increased level of control is a shock, and it's almost impossible not to personally induce consistent oversteer as you work to understand how far you need to push to achieve your desired result.

This can be particularly difficult to adjust to when racing at high speed and preparing yourself for a sharp corner at the end of a long straight, the subtlety of input required being far greater than that of *Project Cars 2*'s current crop of racing genre peers. After a few races, however, your hand and eye start to adjust to the change and it reveals itself as an entirely welcome one that facilitates much better car management and a more intricate set of potential actions.

"It's been really important for us to get the programming of the gamepad right and that's an area that we've started from scratch on," elaborates Chong. "A lot of time has been spent on getting right that relationship between moving an analogue stick and seeing and feeling your car move on the track.

"One of our goals is to focus on realism and simulation, but another goal is to make sure that that's fun. If you've ever been in a high performance car then you'll know that it's exciting and that needs to be translated in what we're building."

The increased sensitivity does indeed add to the sense of 'fun' in that you feel more in control of these incredibly high-powered vehicles, with the sensation being most overt in the new inclusion of rallycross. Rallycross is a relative newcomer to the world of



motorsport, the form seeing adapted rally cars of incredibly high horse power race around short tracks combining tarmac and loose surfaces, jumps, alternate routes and incredibly sharp corners.

Adding to the sense of danger is the fact that up to six cars take to the track at once, the inevitable outcome being collisions that can see cars overturned, shunted into the barriers or spun out and facing the wrong way. Races are short and sharp, the action usually lasting less than ten minutes.

Chong describes rallycross as "violent" and "crazy", as well as being a discipline in which you're racing using "psychotic vehicles that make you forget everything you know about driving." Much of the overzealous personality imbued within these cars comes from the fact that drifting sideways through corners is preferable in your quest for quick lap times than hugging the apex. Therefore, the increased sensitivity of the analogue sticks is a necessity.

In the most extreme of corners the back end of your car is – if you're driving 'properly' – pushed so far out that it enters the corner before your bonnet, meaning you're essentially driving backwards through the bend. This requires a level of precision that, while it looks messy and disordered in comparison to circuit racing, is every bit as technically challenging as speeding over tarmac.

"We have included a beginner rallycross car which is quite light and doesn't have too much power," reassures Chong when quizzed on just how challenging rallycross is for newcomers. "In that you can drive more like you're used to in a circuit racing car because it's not powerful enough to perform crazy sideways dives into corners.

"You can use that as a means to transition into rallycross and learn the tracks and the best lines through them. You'll still need to use the handbrake a little bit through corners, though, and that's a good way to understand how that tool can help you win a race." »

The increasing strength of VR

PROVING THAT IMMERSION NEEDN'T BE A SLAVE TO RESOLUTION

Slightly Mad had been working with Oculus for three years prior to the release of the first *Project Cars*, a relationship that brought about best-in-class level VR support for the game on PC. As such, expectation regarding the quality of *Project Cars 2*'s VR offering is justifiably high and nothing less than the setting of a new bar for performance will be enough to satisfy a community hungry for technological innovation.

Like its predecessor, *Project Cars 2* will again be playable through both the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive – with PlayStation VR not confirmed but supposedly being worked on. Our experience thus far has been limited to Oculus Rift, which works beautifully and represents an immediately noticeable improvement in the rendering department. The result of the rendering upgrade is a smoother, more natural-looking experience that comes into its own when travelling at high speeds and observing the trackside hurtling past you.

Importantly, not a hint of motion sickness threatened to ruin the experience – although this might well have been helped by the fact that Slightly Mad had us sitting in the top of range CXC Motion Pro II cockpit. The Motion Pro II literally throws you about in accordance with every bump your car encounters in the road, triggering your physical sensations to pair nicely with those visual ones coming in through the Rift.

Still, the technical quality of *Project Cars 2* in VR is undeniable. It might not offer the same resolution as a top of the range screen, but the way in which it absorbs you into the game more than makes up for it.



"We're looking at real life and trying to match ourselves to that"

■ You'll be spending a lot of time with your car sideways in rallycross, the specialist cars designed to skid and glide through corners as opposed to hug the tarmac.

■ Slightly Mad is aiming to strengthen its presence in the eSports arena, and providing a wide variety of cars and tracks to satisfy both digital racers and spectators is one way to do so.

What you've really got to master is the relationship between wheel position and throttle. There are times when you're at full throttle, your wheels are pointing straight and yet your still sliding sideways through the corner. If you've only driven traditional racing cars before then this is going to sound counterintuitive, although those with experience in drift events (real or digital) will feel more at home.

Once you feel comfortable tackling your favoured events, whether that's circuit racing, rallycross or both, then you may want to consider taking advantage of *Project Cars 2*'s promised set of competitive online features. The original game featured an innovative matchmaking system that placed drivers in races that complemented their own driving style and on-track behaviour, and the same idea returns here with the promise of it working even more precisely.

That means if you consistently crash into drivers or drive backwards around the track then you'll be placed with others of a similarly disruptive persuasion. Alternatively, if you quit often due to not being in first position then you will be coupled with others that give up easily. However, if you race fair and stay until the end then you will be given a green light to join in with the adults in the class.

Matchmaking is flanked by a range of improvements to online championships and, specifically, features aimed squarely at the eSports scene. Chong promises a brand new cheat detection system to secure races and make sure everyone is playing to same rules, while new licensing partners are being lined up for official tournaments and events.

"There's also a new broadcast mode," Chong describes, "which lets you send a feed out directly to Twitch or Facebook or wherever you want. New tools that allow you to track and run your own championship are coming, too – whereas in the past you've had to use your own spreadsheets to mark down points and driver positions over a season."

Just as with the driving itself, the aim of *Project Cars 2*'s competitive offerings seems to be very much centred around an attempt to mimic the form and execution of real-life racing events. *iRacing* is presently the undisputed king of the competitive racing simulation arena, and to achieve anywhere that same level of success Slightly Mad is going to have to convince some of that audience to migrate and revise their allegiance. Mitchell deJong himself, for instance, is part of the Coanda Simsport *iRacing* team.

A dedication to realism to the point in which a professional driver can replicate real world skills is a good place for *Project Cars 2* to try and strengthen its simulation reputation, but can Slightly Mad really abandon a mainstream following for a solely hardcore one? Is a reworked control pad input system enough to convince those afraid of, or simply not interested in, a truly one-to-one simulation that this is a game for them over the upcoming *GT Sport* or the inevitable *Forza Motorsport 7*?

By focusing on perfect realism Slightly Mad is no doubt in a wonderful position to create its most impressive racing game yet and one that is capable of outdoing its more established genre bedfellows as far as presenting a perfect simulation is concerned. In doing so, however, it will struggle to attract the kind of mainstream audience required to turn a profit in the age of expensive game development.

As Chong says, though, *Project Cars 2* looks to reality for inspiration, not other games. If it can't match reality, then where does that leave the franchise in the eyes of its creators and expectant fans? Here's hoping *Project Cars 2* lives up to its promises. If it can, then it could well be a contender for the most important racing game we've yet seen.



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Reviews



68

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

Rediscover your love of racing madness in the Mushroom Kingdom



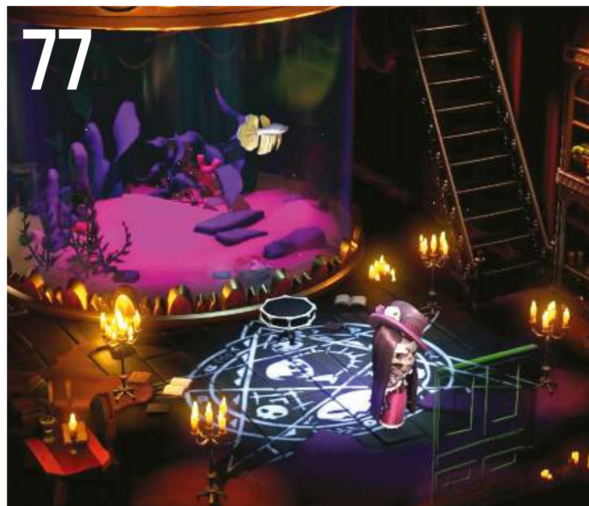
THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













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Above: There's little as satisfying in *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* as managing to Mini-Turbo around every corner and catch air from every little jump on a lap. This is the ultimate karting experience.

POLE POSITION

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe

When we're reviewing a game on a relatively new piece of hardware, we typically try not to review the tech in the process. However, in the case of this edition of *Mario Kart* it's rather difficult not to assess it rather heavily in the context of its new platform. Some things have been changed and upgraded from its Wii U debut, but its real triumphs are found in the inherent strength of the Nintendo Switch itself.

Primary among these strengths is the immediate local multiplayer experience that comes from using the Joy-Cons as individual controllers. Playing *Mario Kart* locally is the ultimate version of the game, whether through Grand Prix or Battle Mode. The immediacy of the challenge, the glory and infuriation of every green shell that hits its mark, pipping an opponent on the line at just the right moment. These are the sorts of moments that are greatly elevated and given extra relish through local play, and the Switch is ready-built for that kind of experience.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nintendo EPD
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8 (2-12 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

The Joy-cons themselves are of course relatively small, but with the clip-on shoulder buttons they work perfectly for this kind of intimate gaming experience. We tried out the new Joy-Con Wheels as well, but found the triggers to be a little loose. They worked fine, but we never felt entirely in control. If you play with people who prefer motion control to the analogue stick, though, then they're actually a nice addition to that kind of experience.

Whether in your hands on the Switch's native screen or blown up on a bigger TV, *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* looks fantastic, too. Blown up, even in four-player split screen, the resolution and frame-rate is excellent. The original game was no slouch, but everything is just a little sharper and smoother on the Switch now, which makes everything feel tighter and more polished as a result.

WHETHER IN YOUR HANDS ON THE SWITCH'S NATIVE SCREEN OR BLOWN UP ON A BIGGER TV, MARIO KART 8 DELUXE LOOKS FANTASTIC

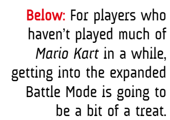
And we have to say that the track design is exceptional. There are a lot of revived tracks from the past, each of which is identified as having appeared on the GameCube, DS, or 3DS, but with many anti-gravity sections added in for a little variety. The addition of jump boosts and some amendments to the Mini-Turbo over the years mean that there are a number of different karting techniques to master and to balance against your kart setup of choice. That all said, the new tracks are especially stunning. Electrodome and the new Rainbow Road in particular stand out as fantastic showcases for the Nintendo universe and its creative spirit. The lighting on these stages is incredible, showcasing the processing power of the console while also

FAQs

Q. IS IT EXACTLY LIKE THE WII U VERSION?
Pretty much, but with all of the DLC included.

Q. SO, WHY IS IT WORTH GETTING AGAIN?
Really because it's on the Switch with better functionality and a potentially bigger player base as a result.

Q. HOW ARE THE SWITCH STEERING WHEELS?
Not essential, a little loose on the triggers, but still kind of fun.





Left: The *Splatoon* Inklings have their own special Mini-Turbo effect, firing off paint from their exhaust instead of flames when you drift around a corner and launch into the next straight.

Below: For players who haven't played much of *Mario Kart* in a while, getting into the expanded Battle Mode is going to be a bit of a treat.



BACK TO BATTLE

Battle Mode has seen some interesting tweaks, some significant and some purely aesthetic, that continue to make it a fun and engaging mode even if the track is where most of our attention is spent. For instance each racer now begins with five balloons rather than three and if you are eliminated and respawn you get three from that point onwards, halving their score as a result. Additionally the leading player is not just denoted by a crown on the map, but by actually wearing one in the game, which is a nice little touch. The *Splatoon*-inspired Battle courses are also a lot of fun with some great verticality and well as tight cornering. Even something as simple as a notification of who hit you and who you hit is a welcome addition, giving *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* proper, triple-A multiplayer cred.

BETTER THAN: LITTLEBIGPLANET KARTING



AS GOOD AS: MARIO KART 8

bringing some glitz and glamour to the tried, tested and beautifully perfected *Mario Kart* formula. The sound design of Electrodome in particular remains a highlight as musical stings ring out as you progress around the track and interact with it in different ways.

And while the addition of so many new karts, bikes, wheel variations and different gliders can feel a little overwhelming, they do add a quite enriching tactical element to how you pick your racer and prepare for competition. We tend towards a mild acceleration over speed ratio with as much handling and grip as we can get so that our Mini-Turbo shenanigans have the greatest chance of being pulled off on twisty circuits. You might prefer to lean more on raw speed, trusting in your ability to maintain full throttle throughout the race. Whatever your preference, *Mario Kart* has now evolved to allow you to pursue it, offering variations between all 42 playable characters and numerous potential combinations of kart.

The only downside, or rather, annoyance, that comes from all of this is the inclusion of the Mercedes tie-in DLC from the Wii U version of the game. We understand that the DLC is free and we're clearly being horribly precious about it, but we're not fans of the blatant advertising move that these three additional cars represent. It feels at odds with the spirit of *Mario Kart* and the spirit of Nintendo to be so blatant and commercial about it. Other than being hit by Spiny Shells, it's the only thing that rubbed us up the wrong way.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PODIUM FINISH: Perhaps its our collective age and nostalgia for classic *Mario Kart*, but we miss the podium cut scenes at the end of a Grand Prix.

When it comes to differences between this and the original version in terms of core mechanics or features, each offers a genuine improvement, if not a substantive one. Something like being able to carry two items at once, for instance, adds some strategic thinking to how you might time them. If you're in front, do you hold onto the Super Horn in case a Spiny Shell comes in (finally a way to deflect them) or waste it on a Red Shell in the hopes you won't regret the choice? What if a Lightning bolt hits and you lose it all anyway?

Smart Steering and Auto-accelerate are features most seasoned karters are going to want to deactivate immediately, but there's certainly value for newcomers in knowing that they won't be falling off the track or forgetting to accelerate in the game. And then there's the Ultra Mini-Turbo for those of us who want to squeeze every boost out of a course. It's a level up from the orange sparks of the Mini-Turbo, requiring you to hold your drift a little longer and gives you an even longer boost if you can reach it.

This is really a greatest hits of *Mario Kart* in one package, offering some of the most memorable tracks and a bundle of new ones, a crazy number of customisation options, and some smart enhancements to gameplay. But the bottom line is that the Switch feels built for this kind of multiplayer and mobile experience, and for that reason it is an essential purchase.



VERDICT 9/10

THE DEFINITIVE EDITION OF THE DEFINITIVE KARTING GAME

GOING BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Little Nightmares

It doesn't take long playing *Little Nightmares* to realise that you're in good hands. This game manages to offer the assurance that you're in the presence of master crafters; developers who know their trade, know the story they want to tell and know how to deliver it. *Little Nightmares* sets its goal, establishes its world within seconds and sets you loose, barely needing to mention anything more to you to let you go.

There's no dialogue or HUD, no button prompts unless you get a little stuck and the game thinks you need to be reminded what the run button is. Everything is instinctual, but then the game is also a simple one. With its base mechanics similar to those of long-time collaborator Media Molecule, Tarsier shouldn't need to give you much by way of tutorials to navigate this puzzle platformer. It should all come rather naturally, and that will lead you to admire its design as you solve its many navigational puzzles.

And we have to say, this is an impressive looking title. There's a stop-motion feel to the experience, helped by the grain effect over the whole game, that helps to give *Little Nightmares* a devilish sense of unreality and yet simultaneously manages to ground the experience. That is to say, it feels at once real and unreal. The animation is smooth and very strange. The Nomes that run around sometimes feel like they have frames of animation removed from their skittering, making them even more peculiar to watch. The denizens of the Maw, where the game is set, are at once cumbersome and gruesome and yet poetic and poised in their movement. Tarsier plays within the conventions of classic horror and thriller territory with great relish, building up some great tension and unleashing it in some wonderful set-piece moments.

Little Nightmares carries a lot of DNA from other experiences and titles within it,

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Tarsier Studios
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FAQs

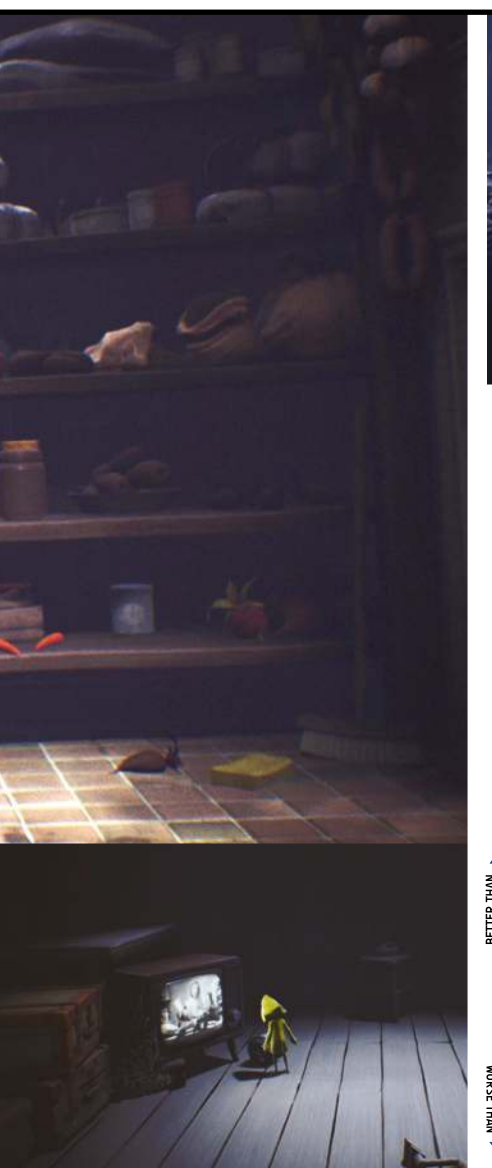
Q. HOW LONG IS THE GAME?
Not very, really. Maybe five hours on a first playthrough.

Q. DOES IT HANDLE LIKE LBP?
Similar, but a little tighter and there's more freedom of movement within the 3D space.

Q. DIDN'T THIS GAME HAVE A DIFFERENT NAME ONCE?
Yes, it did. Isn't that curious…



IT FEELS AS IF THIS GAME IS THE CULMINATION OF YEARS OF CREATIVE STOCKPILING, NOW FINALLY BEING UNLEASHED





Below: The quality of the lighting effects in this game are superb. Six carries a lighter around to help illuminate dark corners and there are lamps and candles to be lit throughout the game to help you out.

Above: Many of the rooms you find yourself in as you attempt to escape the Maw will leave you with more questions than answers. This room full of shoes, for instance, is about as creepy and unnerving as you could ever ask for. **Left:** Being able to grab ahold of the environment and climb around the world makes Six pretty agile. The only real obstacle she needs to overcome with any regularity is her relative height compared to the giants of this world.

BETTER THAN — UNRAVEL

WORSE THAN — INSIDE

something that speaks of a studio that has been harbouring a desire to work on its own IP for over a decade and has been learning from every collaboration it has experienced in those years. There's clearly some *LittleBigPlanet* in the platforming controls and some of the floatiness of the jumping (although we would say that Tarsier has tightened this up considerably by comparison, and it's also not a game quite as heavily dependent on platforming as *LBP*).

Aesthetically, this game shares some similarities with titles that Tarsier attempted to launch previously, showing a great affinity with Grimm Brothers tales, the animation styles of Gilliam and Burton, and a penchant for the dark and gruesome. It feels as if this game is the culmination of years of creative stockpiling now finally being unleashed, so it's actually quite impressive that the game feels so contained and taut. There's no fat or self-indulgence in the design here. No grandstanding. In this respect and a few others it is very reminiscent of Playdead's *Inside*.

So, why is it not quite on the same level as *Inside*? Well, it comes down to gameplay variety. Playdead's puzzle platformer felt more varied in its approach, switching up the pace, the sense of threat, and the types of interactions you were experiencing regularly. It gave the experience more depth as a result while also managing to reveal curious new elements of the world to you (mind control, totalitarian world, etc). In *Little Nightmares*, most of the experience is derived from climbing, jumping, pulling and turning things, intermittently broken up by some stealth. Don't get us wrong, this game doesn't lack for engagement, but pulling a box under a door to grab a handle doesn't reveal anything about the nature of the Maw.

■ And then there's the comparative richness of the world building and how it's revealed. While *Little Nightmares* sets up an amazing scene and introduces a dark and mysterious world that is in many respects the equal of Playdead's, it holds just a little too much back. It doesn't show quite as much in the background of each scene to leave you with burning questions in quite the same way. We left *Inside* confused, exhilarated and full of questions. We finished *Little Nightmares* satisfied and curious. That's not a massive difference, but it's enough to separate the two titles.

Little Nightmares is a small triumph, then, with impressive design, engaging if relatively narrow gameplay and some wonderful world-building. Your character Six proves to be far from the empty cipher she might first appear to be. Your journey of discovery as to her true nature is just as interesting as the wider evaluation of this gory, globulous and gluttonous collection of misfit creatures and the strange building they appear to be amassing in. It manages to combine room-contained puzzle mechanics with action platforming rather well and the stealth element is both challenging and not too frustrating (always a hard balance to strike).

And the puzzling itself, while not offering masses of variety as suggested earlier, is still a lot of fun. Navigating each area, finding the elements you need and working out your path to them is a lot of fun, not least as you unpick the visual cues of the levels to understand what the game expects of you. Everything about this game just clicks nicely into place, allowing it to communicate with you wordlessly and still make perfect sense from beginning to end. And overlaying everything else is a soundtrack that adds some wonderful depth to the whole experience, spinning out from the fairytale and lullaby feel of the rest of the game quite brilliantly. We've waited a while to see Tarsier strike out on its own and it's gratifying to see it succeed with a game as good as this.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LOW LIGHT: *Little Nightmares* does much of its best work in the interplay between light and dark, making you wonder what might be hiding in every corner, behind every door and in every shadow.



GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL

In each of the five stages of *Little Nightmares* there are Nomes you can hug and statues you can smash, and as you finish each level you open up the option to return to them in order to go and find these collectables. What happens when you actually do catch all the Nomes and smash all of the statues? We're actually not sure, because as of the time of writing we're still trying to find them all, but given the nature of this game, not unlike *Inside*, we expect that doing so will reveal something new about Six or the world of the Maw that we spend the game attempting to escape. It's a good reason to go back and play through these levels a few more times.

VERDICT 8/10

CREEPY, CONCISE AND CLASSY

Above: The game's various worlds offer a pretty colour palette and interesting environments to explore, like this isometric section of Glitterglaze Glacier.



REXTRO GAMER

As well as the main single-player/two-player co-op element, Playtonic has developed a collection of nine minigames, too. These vary wildly from arena beat-'em-ups where you have to collect Quills to a fairly fun, frenetic kart racing mode and they do well to augment the base game, even if they don't exactly set the world alight. These can be enjoyed by yourself (although this seems pointless) or with up to three other people from the main menu, although they also feature in the Tome worlds in the main game. Keep an eye out for the arcade tokens hidden throughout the game and spend them with Rextro Sixtyfourus the dinosaur to challenge his high scores – you might just get a Pagie out of it.



Above: That special Rare approach to whimsical character design and quirky dialogue lives on in 2017 and for the most part manages to retain all of its charm.



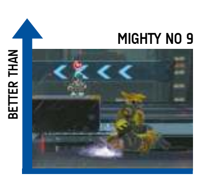
HISTORY IS DOOMED TO REPEAT ITSELF

Yooka-Laylee

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Switch
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: Playtonic Games
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — MIGHTY NO 9





WORSE THAN — BANJO-KAZOOIE





For better or worse, *Yooka-Laylee* is essentially a remake of Rare's *Banjo-Kazooie*. If you played a ton of *Banjo* back in the day then you may have already made up your mind about whether or not you're going to play this, but for the uninitiated *Yooka* represents years of Kickstarter-backed development by industry legends that has culminated in a bright, colourful and mostly fun 3D platform game, albeit one with some problems. It's difficult to ignore many of these problems, but it's equally difficult to ignore the nostalgia factor that permeates every second of *Yooka-Laylee*. As a homage to a well-loved and well-respected N64 platformer, it's pretty perfect, but standing on its own two feet it creaks and groans in the way that you'd expect a 20-year-old format to.

If it *is* nostalgia you're looking for, then *Yooka-Laylee* has it all. Everything about the game has been crafted to directly emulate *Banjo-Kazooie*, from the titular duo themselves, resplendent in their irreverence, to the overarching themes that course throughout the game, the bright and colourful art direction and the gameplay itself. As expected in a 3D platformer, most of your time is spent traversing the various stages with jumps, more jumps and double jumps, but a few extra moves augment this as the game goes on. It's a familiar setup, but the way that puzzles are structured in order to utilise different skills that are paid for with collectible Quills keeps things feeling reasonably fresh into the late game. However, there's no getting away from the fact that each stage is tied to one core concept that, naturally, starts to lose its charm after eight or so hours collecting.

> EACH STAGE IS TIED TO ONE CORE CONCEPT THAT, NATURALLY, STARTS TO LOSE ITS CHARM AFTER EIGHT OR SO HOURS COLLECTING

Platformers have always come with their fair share of collectible items, but *Yooka-Laylee* has taken this to new, dizzying levels. Every Tome world contains 200 Quills, 25 Pagies, five Ghost Writers, a butterfly health container, a power bar upgrade, a molecule pickup that lets you transform and a token for Rextro's arcade, too. It might sound silly, even ungrateful to raise this as a potential negative, but the amount of collectible items is so astonishing that it actually distracts you from fully enjoying the individual worlds that Playtonic has lovingly built and spirals into cold repetition at times. A fair few of the Pagies that you're tasked with collecting are hidden behind puzzles that can be quite obscure or difficult to find, only for said puzzles to be startlingly easy once you've managed to initiate them. It can be frustrating, and many of the puzzles and activities are replicated throughout each Grand Tome, with only a marginal difficulty increase as you progress through the game.



Above: While we applaud Playtonic for including some suitably old-school minigames with *Yooka-Laylee*, they won't hold your attention for too long.

Of course, adhering so rigidly to a template that's so, so old now means that you'll inevitably wander down a path that's impossible to avoid – that being a path riddled with the very same design flaws that 3D platformers always used to suffer from. The most jarring of these in the modern era is a floaty and often wildly imprecise third-person camera, the likes of which we haven't had to deal with since the N64 days. Sure, there aren't any C buttons to clumsily navigate in 2017, but at times the camera in *Yooka-Laylee* causes you to forget that you've got a modern and responsive analog stick under your thumb. It'll swing wildly one second and drag the next, and its autocorrect setting means that any moment of precision platforming can result in a nasty fall if you happen to be near any walls or obstacles that will knock your perspective out of whack.

There are other notable pitfalls as well – swimming and flying handling, for example, is essentially the same as *Banjo-Kazooie*'s was all those years ago: that is, slightly unresponsive and quite fiddly – but this is a game that's genuinely hard to stay mad at for long. For anyone with fond memories of the Rare games of yore, you'll find a lot to love here, even if the gameplay feels dated and occasionally frustrating, and although the world design isn't as good as those that these fine men and women have created in the past, there's still an intangible charm attached to every aspect of the design and visuals that often makes you forget about a proportion of *Yooka-Laylee*'s less-desirable characteristics. Persevere past the first two or three Tome worlds and wait until you get to the casino level – that's when all of the disparate mechanics you've learned start to combine nicely, and the puzzles are much improved from there on out.

Reviewing games can feel fairly binary most of the time. Most of them are often either objectively good or objectively bad, and then something like *Yooka-Laylee* comes along and causes problems because, even after hours of playing, it's bloody difficult to quantify whether or not it actually holds up. Ultimately, this is a 3D platformer from 2001 that has inexplicably appeared in another timeline and ended up here, in 2017, when the best platformers around are 2D and technical, not 3D and a bit clunky. It has all the charm that you can expect from what is ostensibly Rare, all the collectibles you can ask a patient human to collect and all the carefree, whimsical characteristics that any modern indie game would proudly wear on its chest. However, *Yooka-Laylee* has been noticeably transposed into a different era and, at times, suffers for it.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WORLDS APART: Although there's a lot to be said about Playtonic's eye for interesting level themes and design, some of the worlds in *Yooka-Laylee* pale in comparison to *Banjo*'s.

FAQs

Q. SO WHO DESIGNED THIS?
Playtonic is largely made up of people who were formerly at Rare before it was swallowed up by Microsoft.

Q. AS IN *THE* RARE?
Yep, the developer that was behind *Battletoads*, *GoldenEye 007*, *Perfect Dark* and much, much more.

Q. DIDN'T IT MAKE BANJO-KAZOOIE?
Funny you ask that… Rare certainly did make *Banjo-Kazooie*. Oddly enough, *Yooka-Laylee* is pretty similar.



VERDICT 6/10

COMPETENT AND CHARMING, IF A LITTLE DISAPPOINTING

REMEMBERING THE GOOD OL' DAYS

Thimbleweed Park

Nostalgia. That comforting familiarity that comes with a bitter twist of melancholy for a time forever lost. Distorted memories of the way it used to be and never was. The rediscovery of valuable relics that struggle to find their expression in a present that's irrevocably changed. All of that is to be found in *Thimbleweed Park*, a title pitched by Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick of *Manic Mansion* and *Monkey Island* fame as a game made to feel like a lost LucasArts adventure classic. It is an unashamed nostalgia project. Their attempt to walk the line between past and present. They are largely successful, but it's a difficult task and it's not surprising that they occasionally stumble.

You start the game able to switch between two FBI agents – the acerbic and cynical Agent Rey and the naive and upbeat Agent Reyes. They are investigating the appearance of a dead body in this strange town that's clearly got something to hide. It's hinted that each agent has ulterior motives, too, which is instantly intriguing. Indeed, the game is great at cultivating and maintaining a sense of mystery that makes you want to push on and uncover the secrets that *Thimbleweed Park* hides. Agents Rey and Reyes serve their purpose as vehicles for the game to deliver its myriad hit-and-miss jokes and fourth-wall breaking adventure game references – with which it is a little too preoccupied – but they are dull characters. Thankfully, newer and more interesting ones are soon introduced.

Game developer Delores eventually takes centre stage in the plot, providing the game's heart as its most likeable and sincere character. Then there's Ransome the bleeping insult clown. His unwavering belligerence and expletive-laden rants, punctuated with bleeping bleeps every other bleeping word, provide a liberatingly aggressive way of engaging with the bleeping idiots that populate *Thimbleweed* that made us chuckle. Finally, there's Franklin, who is, unfortunately for him, dead. Fortunately for us, his ghostly abilities offer a different way of interacting with the world, providing a

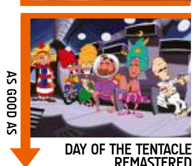
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS4, iOS, Android
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Terrible Toybox
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows7 (fully patched), 2Ghz Processor, 4GB RAM, Intel HD 3000 or better, 1GB available storage.
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

THE BOOK OF UNWRITTEN TALES 2





AS GOOD AS

DAY OF THE TENTACLE REMASTERED



Above: The name of the recently-deceased Chuck looms large over the town. The 'tubes' he invented power almost everything in the town and are key to solving a fair few of the game's puzzles.

Below: The spectre Franklin gets his own set of ghostly verbs to use to interact with the world around him, though some don't have any practical use.

RANSOME THE BLEEPING INSULT CLOWN'S EXPLETIVE LADEN RANTS ARE PUNCTUATED WITH BLEEPING BLEEPS EVERY OTHER BLEEPING WORD



FAQs

Q. CAN A NEWBIE ENJOY IT?
Yes they can, but they won't get as much out of it as an adventure game aficionado.

Q. IS IT A LOST CLASSIC?
The idea that it's a fake lost LucasArts classic is undermined by constant fourth-wall breaking comments that remind you that it's not.

Q. IS IT SHORT?
No. It will probably take you somewhere in the region of 12 hours to finish.

Below: Look closely and you'll see one tiny pixel of dust. Of course *Thimbleweed Park* has a quest line that's basically a joke about the maligned practice of pixel hunting in old adventure games. Mercifully, it is optional.



basis for some of the game's best character switching puzzles.

Those puzzles where you must switch between the game's multiple characters to solve them represent some of its highlights. It's an aspect of the game that's a little underdeveloped and perhaps could have been made more fundamental – as with *Day Of The Tentacle*'s time-travelling character-swapping puzzles – but still works well, even just in giving you different threads to pursue when you get stuck. *Thimbleweed*'s puzzling isn't free of frustrations: we were disappointed to discover that there are far too many puzzles with difficulty that lies primarily in finding the items that you need to solve it, rather than having to engage your brain to work out a solution. That's an aspect we would have been happy to leave in the past.

Thimbleweed Park isn't boneheaded in its loyalty to the era of Nineties adventures. Indeed, it can be smart in the way that it evokes the classics. Its chunky pixels stir memories of titles like *Zak McKraken*, Manic Mansion, and *Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis*. 'This', you think, 'is exactly how my favourite adventure games used to look.' In reality, it is far more detailed and uses lighting in a way that you'd never see in the adventures that inspired it. That it is prepared to use modern techniques to create a fantastic-looking adventure and does so without losing the ability to tap into the nostalgia of the audience at which it is aimed is to its credit.

Key in cultivating that old point-and-click feel are those big ol' verbs at the bottom of the screen. In the style of those classic adventures, you click on verbs like 'Open', 'Use' and 'Give' and then objects in your inventory, the environment, or characters, to interact with them. However, Gilbert and Winnick have evidentially identified some frustrations with the system that they've tried to iron out. Many interactions accept multiple verbs, meaning it's less likely that you will get stuck on a puzzle because you didn't use the precise verb the game wanted you to. In fact, you often don't need to select a verb at all thanks to a right-click that auto-selects the right verb for you. These changes certainly make the game less fiddly and finicky than the titles it is based on, but they also render the verb system largely pointless. We struggle to think of a single example of a puzzle that relies on the use of verbs in a clever or interesting way. Stripped of its significance as a tool for engaging with the world and its puzzles, is seems the system is only there to support *Thimbleweed Park*'s aesthetic of nostalgia.

The implementation of the verb system is emblematic of the difficulty faced when making a game like this. What do you keep from adventure game history and what do you jettison? When do you modernise and when do you not? If you *do* modernise, how far do you go? There are missteps in the answers *Thimbleweed Park* gives to these questions, but it just about gets the balance right. At least, it does if you are part of the audience at which this game is pitched. You do need to be familiar with the idiosyncrasies of the genre to truly 'get' *Thimbleweed Park* – the jokes, the references, the story, the structure, the aesthetic, and the themes, are all explicitly related to adventure game history and our relationship to it. It can't truly recapture the feeling of playing those classic adventures for the first time, nor can it lose all the negative baggage associated with them, but it does find a path that allows it to do a little bit of both.



VERDICT 7/10
A PLEASANT PUZZLING TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

EASY MODE: Uncharacteristically for the adventure genre, *Thimbleweed Park* has an easy mode that cuts down on the complexity of puzzles for those who are more interested in the story.

IT AIN'T OVER

There's something a bit off in the way *Thimbleweed Park* is pitched to the "true lovers" of the genre "who miss classic adventures and all their innocence and charm". Sure, the Nineties produced many classic adventures that had a style unique to the era. Does that mean that the generation whose reference points for adventure games are *Life Is Strange* and *Night In The Woods* cannot be "true lovers" of the genre? Can those who want "charm" from their adventures not find it in the beautiful *Lumino City*? Does the legacy of the 2D adventure not live on in *Machinarium*, or Wadjet Eye's retro-inspired pixel art adventures? If you love adventure games, there's no need to live in the past.





Solo missions are unlocked as you make your way through the story, but the tougher online variants (in which you can still use AI allies) have a separate progression system.

HUNTING SEASON IS SEMI-OPEN

Toukiden 2

As more and more developers embrace open world design, it feels like the term is becoming more and more despised. Whether due to expectations of a Ubisoft-style cookie cutter set of fetch quests, towers and collectibles, or fear or a daunting directionless experience, the term today has quite the opposite effect to what it did back in the wake of *Grand Theft Auto III*. But here's the thing – an open world is not an inherently good or bad thing, nor is it something that can be easily quantified.

Despite what the marketing material may tell you, *Toukiden 2* isn't open world in the *Elder Scrolls* or *Far Cry* sense. It's closer to something like *Dark Souls*, or a slightly more modular *Dragon's Dogma* – a series of interconnected areas to explore, not unlike what you'd get if you laid out all the maps in a *Monster Hunter* game together, joined them all up and kicked down all the loading walls.

But it's not like that really matters – it's not an open world game. While playing through the story, you run from the settlement straight to one area, deal with an Oni and return to town. When doing missions, you teleport straight to an arena with the Oni in question, kill them and warp back. The only time you're out in the world without direction is when you're there through choice, either exploring or gathering supplies in order to improve your gear to tackle larger, more powerful Oni.

When it comes to combat, *Toukiden 2* builds on the original game expertly, with every one of the weapon classes feeling involved and empowering. Each has its own gimmick, ranging from the simple (club hits deal more damage when the tip connects, leading to a powered-up state if you land these consistently) to the more complex (rifles involve juggling ammo stock/types and debuff grenades while hitting critical spots) and while there isn't a clear 'use X weapon on Y Oni' system, you'll want to play around with all the different weapons just to see what crazy tricks they're capable of.

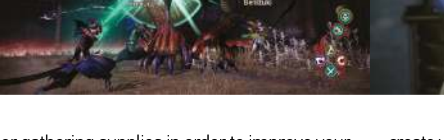
The selection of Oni is greatly improved, even more so when you factor in the numerous reskins that slightly switch up elemental weaknesses and attack patterns. The original's 'life force' system remains intact and still works well, the focus being on destroying body parts to create weaknesses for your team to exploit. As well as returning Destroyer attacks to instantly weaken a part, there's now also the Oni Burial. When its gauge fills, this Demon Hand attack can permanently remove certain body parts, often with game-changing consequences – rip a leg off and an Oni might squirm or scramble around differently for the rest of the fight, or tear off a tail to see it stumble and lose balance when making certain attacks. It's certainly satisfying, although having the Demon Hand in addition to everything else does give players a few too many panic buttons, making the game somewhat easy as a result.

Toukiden 2 is comfortably PS4's best *Monster Hunter* stand-in, but its novel systems make it more than just another hunter in line to fill Capcom's still-empty shoes. It's a superb co-op action game in its own right.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SAY WHAT?: Incidental dialogue is untranslated and unsubtitled. If it *did* add anything in the original release, it certainly doesn't now.

NO SWEAT: Genre veterans will absolutely breeze through the main campaign, and even most of High Rank is a cakewalk.



VERDICT 8/10

MO' ONI, FEWER PROBLEMS

THE ULTIMATE CLOCK BLOCK

The Sexy Brutale



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK/Spain
PUBLISHER: Tequila Works
DEVELOPER: Cavalier Game Studios, Tequila Works
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

An ornate chapel, a luxurious casino, some secluded, richly-decorated guest bedrooms. *The Sexy Brutale*'s backdrop certainly screams intrigue, calling to mind greater works like *The Mousetrap*, the board game *Cluedo* and IO Interactive's *Hitman* series. And with those influences in mind, it's inviting to describe Cavalier Game Studios' and Tequila Works' murder mystery in grander terms than it deserves. Its time-rewind system, whereby you restart the day over and over until you can successfully prevent the deaths of your friends, all of whom are staying at the eponymous nightclub, at first seems novel. Their various deaths, each more unusual and fiendish than the last, betray *The Sexy Brutale*'s dark sense of humour. Beneath this veneer, however, lies very little. *The Sexy Brutale* is a small game, made by a small number of people, but that's not exoneration enough for its central contradiction: where aesthetically it promises substance and scheming, in practise it's a thin, one-note experience which does little to stimulate your mind.

It's a convincing idea. By manipulating items and occurrences around your oblivious pals, you save them from meeting what was supposed to be their inevitable doom. If you're unable to rescue somebody in time, you hit a single button and time warp back to the start of the day, to observe their routine again and try to work out what you need to prevent, or instigate, in order to save their lives. Your first charge, for example, is shot dead by a man with a rifle. After rewinding the day a few times, you're able to find the rifle beforehand and exchange its loaded cartridge for a blank, thus giving your man, later down the line, a chance moment to defend himself. *Hitman*'s influence on *The Sexy Brutale* perhaps doesn't end at its lavish sets. You operate as a kind of Agent-47-in-reverse, setting up the elaborate circumstances that will save someone's life, before watching them play out, resetting and adjusting your approach accordingly.

But where *The Sexy Brutale* falls short of such – or of any – lofty comparison is when you realise there is only one method for saving each guest. Rather than experiment with the environments, or machinate a scheme yourself, you are essentially collecting items and inserting them into other items in a prescribed order. It becomes a dispassionate process, not dissimilar to old point-and-click games. But *Monkey Island* was saved by its jokes. *The Sexy Brutale*'s story and characters, by unavoidable comparison, are simple and undercooked. Rewinding the day feels like restarting a dull cutscene, and then simply trying to delineate at which point you need to step in and hit a button. Each new guest involves simply going through the same motions. And so *The Sexy Brutale*'s sumptuous backgrounds and high concept feel like a disguise - pull away the mask, and you're underwhelmed to discover it was slight and empty all along.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GROUNDHOG PLAY: Despite *The Sexy Brutale*'s colourful setting and cast, its murders are solved almost always the same way, by combining objects, like an old point-and-click adventure. So more variety would have made a big difference

BETTER THAN

ETHER ONE





THE ROOM 3

WORSE THAN

VERDICT 5/10

A NOVEL IDEA BECOMES A BLAND EXPERIENCE





Above: *The Sexy Brutale* boasts a variety of abstract, occasionally humorous death sequences. Fail to intervene in time and guests may end up pushed down a coal chute, hanging from a church bell or devoured by a gigantic spider.





Above: Weaving around the world can be nerve-wracking and satisfying and equal measure.

STOP HISSING AROUND

Snake Pass

Snake Pass is named after a treacherous road that connects Manchester to Sheffield, where developer Sumo Digital is based, and the game itself is just as rocky and difficult to navigate and as its real-life counterpart. You take control of a snake, Noodle, as you make your way across a jungle, facing platforming obstacles that you'll have to wind, curl and slither around.

The first obstacle that you'll have to overcome in *Snake Pass* is the controls. With a steep learning curve, you'll find yourself fighting to move Noodle forward, curling him around all manner of ledges and platforms in order to proceed. After acclimatising yourself to the game's physics and controls, however, you'll find that the game doesn't have much to offer in terms of challenge.

Levels in *Snake Pass* are all structured around collecting three gems, each of which is usually placed beyond obstacles in the level that you'll have to worm your way around. The game likes to switch things up in terms of aesthetic, with both lava levels and water levels that also put a little spin on traversal, but these different looks don't bring much to the table in terms of changing how you actually complete them.

The cel-shaded, 90s Rareware look of *Snake Pass* is certainly charming, but it never really changes as you progress through the game, despite the variety of set dressing in the different worlds. The levels also dramatically jump in difficulty, to the point of almost being unfair, especially when you take into account the fact that the camera doesn't like to play ball at crucial moments.

In addition to the high learning curve, the puzzles in *Snake Pass* never fulfil the potential of the traversal systems that they're built around. There are no super-challenging Dark Worlds, like in *Super Meat Boy*, nor is there a 'Champion's Road'-esque set of levels, that combines all the skills that you've learned after battling with the controls over the course of the game. The challenge is always presented to you, but the game never builds upon it.

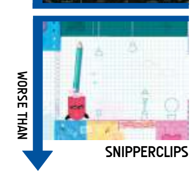
Though Noodle's design is full of character, *Snake Pass* can also get a little too sickly-sweet to look at. Its eye-popping palette and Rare-inspired visuals make it the videogame equivalent of a packet of Rowntree's Fruit Pastilles. Ultimately *Snake Pass* doesn't quite live up to the promise of being a satisfying puzzle game. The game knows that its strengths lie in the moment-to-moment action of creating ways to tackle obstacles. But unfortunately, that's simply not enough to carry *Snake Pass* past the flaws in both its controls and puzzle design.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Switch
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sumo Digital
DEVELOPER: Sumo Digital
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — HUE





WORSE THAN — SNIPPERCLIPS

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CATCHY SOUNDTRACK: David Wise's soundtrack complements the tone of the game and is catchy enough to get stuck in your head for days.



VERDICT 5/10

FLAWED EXECUTION & UNRELENTING DIFFICULTY

Below: Some more unique puzzles in the game make for short bursts of interesting gameplay.






There's a near-constant sense of surrealism draped across Blackwood Crossing, the presence of which puts you in a state of constant awareness and engagement as you strain to try to understand each bizarre occurrence.

ENDS UP ON THE WRONG TRACK

Blackwood Crossing

Whether you want to describe it as an adventure game or a walking simulator, a point and click puzzler or a piece of interactive fiction, there's no denying that *Blackwood Crossing*'s charm is immediate. The visuals are an alluring blend of Pixar-esque character designs layered with a *Alice In Wonderland* sense of oddity, whilst the story of two young siblings seeking to understand the grief caused them by their earlier life is engaging in its humanity and tenderness.

For much of the time spent with protagonists Scarlett and Finn there's a feeling that you're moving through a Louis Aragon poem or a Paulo Coelho tale of young adults finding their place in the world. Environmentally, there are strong parallels with too often overlooked classic *The Last Express*. On paper, everything is here for the provision of a story that has the power to stay with you after the credits end and the train you spend much of the game travelling upon comes to rest.

Too often, however, a slew of irritating interactive hurdles reveal themselves and undermine your attempts to succinctly draw meaning and inspiration from the themes and characters laid out before you.

Playing on PlayStation 4, for instance, DualShock 4 in hand, clicking on items and points of interest is a chore given the awkward way the camera moves and the inconsistency with which the icon communicating an available action reveals itself. Too often you find yourself needlessly searching for the exact point where must place your cursor over an item that you know must hold some information.

There's also an issue with the act of walking; a first-person camera that bobs up and down creating a sense that you're on a ship sailing across an invisible ocean. This approach does create a palpable sense of motion and mimics a human's head movement as one foot moves in front of the next, but the effect is unnerving when consumed through a static, flat screen.

Truly, such issues are a genuine shame given that *Blackwood Crossing* does a beautiful job of asking questions and leaving gaps for you to fill in with your mind. Far too many games refuse to put their trust in the player and insist on guiding every second of a potential emotional transition, but the writers and designers of Brighton-based PaperSeven have refused to do that.

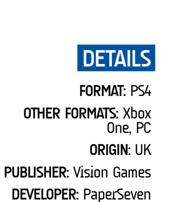
With greater finesse applied to the technical structure in which you interact with *Blackwood Crossing* it could well have revealed itself as a classic within a genre that is consistently the most interesting and progressive in gaming. If PaperSeven can learn from its shortcomings here and employ a course of action for overcoming them then its next game is going to be well worth paying attention to.

VERDICT 7/10
AN ADMIRABLE EFFORT THAT JUST FALLS SHORT

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WALKING SIMULATION: Movement is incredibly turgid, which becomes more frustrating the more you play. Given that you spend so much time walking around, it's almost unforgiveable that the act of doing so can be this irritating.

DETAILS



FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Vision Games
DEVELOPER: PaperSeven
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
HOMESICK


WORSE THAN
FIREWATCH


A TRUE SURVIVAL HORROR

Outlast 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive
DEVELOPER: Red Barrels
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core i-3530, 4GB RAM, Windows Vista/7/8/10, 1GB VRAM, Nvidia Geforce GTX 260 or ATI Radeon HD 4870, 30GB Storage
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

For every high budget, mainstream horror film, with its larger-than-life villains and cheap jump scares, there's a lo-fi, nasty indie flick that makes you feel uncomfortable just thinking about it. Classic US stuff like the original *The Hills Have Eyes*, Eighties video nasties and the wave of French extreme horror films from the early Noughties all share a similar grittiness – where the gore is black, brown, deep crimson, not just blood red – and the horrific events that unfold aren't designed to scare a popcorn guzzling crowd. They're there to shock; to leave an impression. *Outlast 2* is very much in the latter camp.

After crash landing in the Arizona desert and being separated from his wife, Blake Langermann – a documentary maker investigating the murder of a young pregnant woman – finds himself in Temple Gate a compound ran by Sullivan Knoth, a religious-fanatic-turned-cult-leader who has penned his own biblical verse, the book of Knoth. He's amassed a fair few followers – and a fair few who oppose him – and they're all out to carve you to pieces. So, much like the original game, you've got to do a whole lot of running and hiding to keep yourself alive and escape what can be an extremely grim fate.

There haven't been many changes to the *Outlast* formula. It's still linear, avoiding confrontation with the enemies is paramount and using your video camera's night vision mode to light your way in the dark are still the hallmarks of the series. There's a nice new narrative feature where you can watch footage you have filmed to glean more back story from a certain place or event. You can have your glasses knocked off which causes some panic-inducing moments of disorientation and there's now a microphone on the camera which can be used to pick up distant sounds, like a makeshift radar.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MATURITY: There's a greater psychological horror bent to *Outlast 2*, with some clever transitioning to and from certain sequences allowing the protagonist – and player – to start questioning what exactly is real.

Above: The graphics are great, which only adds to the horror. By using the night vision filter and the fact that almost the entire game is in pitch darkness to hide any rough edges it maintains a realistic look throughout.



OUTLAST

BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD

The increased scope of this sequel isn't in the gameplay, it's in the setting, atmosphere and the situations it puts you in, and they're not for the feint of heart. Graphic naked corpses litter almost every area and the language you hear is as near the knuckle as you can get. It makes you feel uncomfortable, and the only way you can deal with it is to get through it. There's literally no fighting it.

Outlast 2 certainly isn't going to win over anyone who didn't like the first game – running away rather than fighting for survival is an acquired taste – but for those after another fix of hardcore horror, Red Barrels has upped the fear factor exponentially. 'Please Enjoy' it states at the start, after warning of 'intense violence, gore and graphic sexual content'. 'Enjoy' may not be the right word when dealing with such subjects, but there's something here that gorehounds and horror fans will get a lot out of.



Above: A chase sequence through a cornfield provides an early highlight, with enemies only giving away their positions via their torch beams, which if you see, usually means it is too late! Visually striking and super tense, it's *Outlast* at its best.



ANOTHER UNPLEASANT, BUT ENTERTAINING EXPERIENCE

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Norway
PUBLISHER: Mattis Folkestad
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £3.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

YOU FIGHT LIKE A DIARY FARMER

Milkmaid Of The Milky Way

Here we have a special kind of game; a whimsical fairy tale that takes a humble milkmaid on the adventure of a lifetime, forcing her to leave behind her isolated Norwegian origins for an opportunity to explore the stars – and save her beloved cattle along the way. Created by indie developer Mattis Folkestad, *Milkmaid Of The Milky Way* is a remarkable point-and-click adventure, leaning on the lessons of the past to create something that feels familiar but ultimately fresh, and in a way that so many of genre games fail to achieve.

Styled after the Charles Cecil school of adventure game design, *Milkmaid* owes a debt to the likes of *Beneath A Steel Sky* and *Broken Sword* – complete with an icon-led interface and the occasional obtuse puzzle – but it separates itself from the pack with a handful of delightful quirks. Every person (and entity) that Ruth encounters is, for example, bound by speaking entirely in rhyming couplets, a sweet touch that ensures all dialogue and investigation retains a sense of buoyancy throughout the three hour experience.

Whether it's played on a monitor or in your hands on an iOS device, *Milkmaid* also happens to look stunning, offering a gorgeous blend of punctuating pixel art and painterly rough chalk aesthetics; it all comes together alongside the isolated music beats, clever dialogue twists and engaging puzzle design to find a serious sense of style. *Milkmaid Of The Milky Way* is bound by the games that came before it, but it's the perfect adventure to lose a few hours within.

BETTER THAN

KING'S QUEST: A KNIGHT TO REMEMBER



WORSE THAN



THIMBLEWEED PARK



Above: *Milkmaid Of The Milky Way* is an independent adventure game created by machineboy, AKA. Mattis Folkestad, and the result is pretty amazing. This is one rhyming, retro release that you should definitely play, either on PC or on the move.



VERDICT 7/10

AN ADVENTURE YOU SHOULDN'T MISS

IT WILL MESS WITH YOUR HEAD

Stories Untold

Dripping with Eighties nostalgia, *Stories Untold* demonstrates how a seemingly-outdated genre can be revived and updated to create a fresh, yet familiar, experience. It transcends the two-dimensional limits of traditional parser-based text adventures, blending a selection of genres together by punctuating each eerie plot development with a new mechanic, achieving deep and unnerving thrills that you'll struggle to find elsewhere. While we expected that switching between genres would feel disjointed, we were pleasantly surprised by how each of the four chapters introduced different gameplay systems without breaking the momentum of the story, or disorientating us too much.

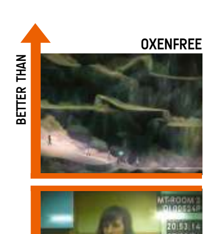
No Code has done an excellent job of drip-feeding slithers of the story throughout, intentionally leaving us in the dark while cleverly dangling all the answers right in front of our noses – the result is an experience that's progressively engaging and difficult to put down. Rather than relying on cheap scares, the psychological horror creeps in as a result of the player's uncertainty. You are aware that a menacing presence lingers just behind you – off camera – and the game frequently reminds you of it, but you have no idea what dreadful form that presence could morph into and this keeps you on edge while moving forward. Each of the four experimental adventures feel unique and, to begin with, unrelated, yet as we progressed through the game we began to realise how these events fit together. *Stories Untold* throws you into a fairly nonsensical world and then slowly unravels its chilling resolution, closing on a poignant and melancholic ending after what initially appeared to be a random string of events.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Scotland
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: No Code
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

OXENFREE



WORSE THAN



HER STORY



The game prides itself on unique and demanding puzzles. You may want to put your phone away and start taking notes.

Overall, we thoroughly enjoyed our time playing *Stories Untold*. The vague, experimental nature of each of the episodes held our attention right to the end, while guiding us through a series of engaging puzzles. At points, you may feel unsure of how to progress, due to the limits imposed by the text parser however, these moments are few and far between and it's unlikely that they will ruin your overall experience. We recommend that you jump in and experience the game for yourself as its best played spoiler-free, in a dark room. You won't be disappointed.



VERDICT 8/10

AN UNFORGETTABLE JOURNEY



The arena-based combat makes for deceptively tough battles that require everything you've got. Take time to master your disciplines, stock up on Blue Apples, and make sure your squaddies are ready to lend a hand from the sidelines.

AN IMPRESSIVE INDIE DEBUT

Shiness: The Lightning Kingdom

It's easy to write off *Shiness: The Lightning Kingdom*. It's too pretty, too cutesy. The score's too quaint, and the dialogue a touch too cheesy. The characters more or less all fall into loose caricatures that you've seen – and played – before, but it's an indie game… an indie game brought to life via Kickstarter, no less. What the else were you expecting?

Beneath its endless china-blue sky, however, lies a surprisingly robust action RPG; it's a game courageous enough to strip out the trappings of its peers – the endless grind, the recycled fetch quests, you know the stuff – and present a pared-down fighting game that's as beautiful to play as it is to look at. And we don't say that lightly: *Shiness* is stunning, with each set-piece stuffed with bold, bright colour and a delightful dollop of magical whimsy.

Buddies Chado and Poky crash-land on Gendys, a lush island rich in lore and creatures that, inexplicably, exist only to beat you up. Progression is steady, but not slow, and comes with all the trappings you'd expect, including combo unlocks, magical power-ups, armour, loot, plus new teammates and their expanding skillsets. Puzzles are simplistic (although there's one or two complete bastards just to keep you on your toes), and you'll need a good 20-30 hours just to get through the game's campaign – or more, if you enjoy exploration and soaking up the side quests. Yet despite this, *Shiness* rarely feels artificially stretched out.



FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Interactive
DEVELOPER: Enigami
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DRAGON BALL: XENOVERSE 2



WORSE THAN

NIOH

If you're thinking all the care and attention went into crafting *Shiness*' gorgeous sun-kissed vistas at the expense of the fighting, though, you're mistaken. The *Naruto*-esque combat is tourniquet-tight, inviting the player to keep refreshing tactics thanks to cyclical buffs that require you to chop and change your elemental attacks to match the arena that you're playing in. And, sure, you can button-mash and hope for the best, like most games, but you will soon learn the value of mastering disciplines and memorising those combos. As the further into the game you step, the tougher those battles will be… and they're not all that easy to begin with.



WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NO I IN T-E-A-M: We don't want multiplayer for the sake of it, but given tag-teams are already hardwired into the game, why not let us buddy-up with a friend and engage in a little couch co-op?

Battles are fast, furious one-on-one affairs, although your squaddies can jump in and out of combat at the touch of a button, and offer support from the sidelines by way of buffs and health boosts that you can tailor to your own preferences. Perfect pacing means you'll usually be able to tackle foes as you organically encounter them, although even the battles you'll encounter just walking around are far from easy – and, eventually, pointless: grinding only pays off if you're prepared to tackle enemies that are as levelled-up as you are.

If you've been flirting with the idea of buying an action-RPG but fear the time commitment, *Shiness: The Lightning Kingdom* might just be the compromise you're looking for.



YOU WON'T BELIEVE IT'S AN INDIE GAME, EITHER

NOT THE VERSION OF THE NOTEBOOK YOU WERE EXPECTING

Drawn To Death

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: The Bartlet Jones Supernatural Detective Agency/ SIE San Diego Studio
PRICE: 15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
TWISTED METAL (2012)

WORSE THAN
STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

Sony's latest attempt to strike *Rocket League*-esque gold with another digital-only darling might just be the most David Jaffe thing David Jaffe has ever made. Forget the ultraviolent deity slaughter of *God Of War* or the vehicular mayhem of *Twisted Metal*, *Drawn To Death*'s juvenile humour is the veteran developer distilled into his impurest form. Special moves that make opponents swell until they explode in a shower of gore? Check. More offensive humour than a 1950s cocktail lounge after hours? Check. A big-breasted shark with a Japanese accent? Err… check?

So we're all agreed *Drawn To Death*'s online-focused third-person antics certainly make for bags of foul-mouthed personality, but does it make for a decent online shooter? Not even close, in fact in places it's downright imbalanced and in serious need of a patch or two, but you can be sure there's nothing on PSN quite like it.

That unique teenager's angst/sexual-fetish-filled notebook styling didn't really pop in screenshots prior to release, but in motion it's biro-sketched action really, ahem, leaps off the page. But while that high school textbook doodle aesthetic lends *DTD* a unique charm, it doesn't take long to grate as you shoot and leap (in a very floaty, *Infamous*-esque way that's far too slow) around its roster of fantastical locations.

That's not to say there aren't some well-thought out arenas to choose from – especially those that rely verticality with multiple floors, jump pads and teleports (conjuring, albeit briefly, the speedy days of *Unreal Tournament* and the like) or sprinkle in deadly environmental elements such as giant tentacles that swat you to death – but that mostly unfilled art style eventually drains each locale of any real sense of memorable identity.

So let's talk about that frustrating imbalance – there's just so much of it as of launch. For instance, some characters possess certain special abilities that are painfully overpowered compared to most others (such as the teddy-bear-headed Alan, whose ability to turn invisible and regenerative health make him a popular powerhouse in any lobby). Jaffe and co. have attempted to make each character a strong counter for another (the airborne Cyborgula can see Alan when he's invisible, etc.), but it's just the tip of the lopsided iceberg.

Every character has too much health in a match, a factor that makes killing an opponent a slog at best, as well as turning most of *DTD*'s memorably-designed weapons (including a dragon-shaped rocket launcher and a burning corpse that can be lobbed onto enemies like an explosive ball and chain) into something as dangerous as a leaky water pistol.

Drawn To Death is a teenage boy's/ 45-year-old man's inner-monologue in digital form. The game revels in its infantile humour, and it's genuinely funny for the first few hours, but after a while that skin falls away to reveal a shooter that's unlikely to laugh last until it addresses some serious problems.

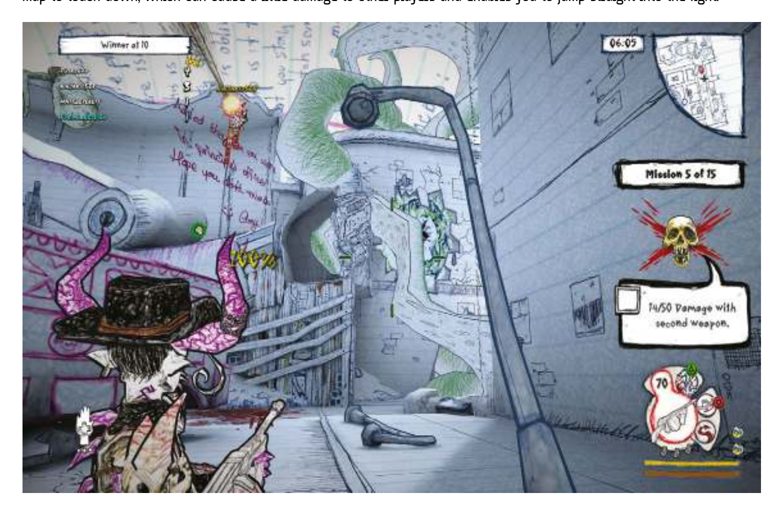
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PLAYING DIRTY: Instead of relying on audible taunts (characters spew out trash talk automatically), you can assign GIF-style pictures to different swipes of the touchpad. Consider almost all of them NSFW.



Above: You start and spawn into every match by skydiving from the pages of a notebook. You can choose where on the map to touch down, which can cause a little damage to other players and enables you to jump straight into the fight.





Above: Each character comes with their own unique set of special moves (activated via L1), and each one can be successfully blocked or countered by another avatar on the roster. A fair few of these are melee-based, adding a little beat-'em-up action to each match.



VERDICT 6/10
NOT QUITE A JAFFE CLASSIC



WHY I ❤...

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

RAPHAEL COLANTONIO, CEO/CREATIVE DIRECTOR, ARKANE STUDIOS

When I talk about games that I love, I always end up saying the same ones: **Ultima VII**, **Thief** *and* **Deus Ex**, *but I want to pick something else. A more recent game that I liked was* **Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor** *and it's really because of its Nemesis system.*

One of the difficulties with villains in games is the face time: building up the hatred that you feel towards them. It was hard for us in **Dishonored** *because you don't see them, they are off somewhere else. But the cool thing with* **Shadow Of Mordor** *is that it dynamically creates this enemy for you; it has such an emotional engagement and value that you really begin to hate your Orc enemies for real. It's one of the best features I've seen in a game recently.*



"It's one of the best features I've seen in a game recently"

RAPHAEL COLANTONIO, ARKANE STUDIOS

RETRO

NO.187



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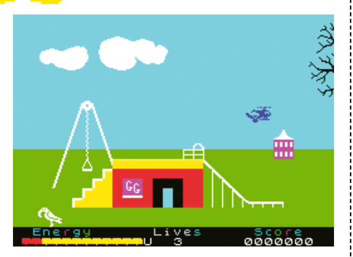
THE RETRO GUIDE TO... GREMLIN

Gremlin Graphics started off life above a computer shop, but became one of the UK's most important publishers. **games™** looks back at some of its best (and worst) moments.

IAN STEWART AND Kevin Norburn were astute men. Realising that interest in home computers was on the rise, the pair opened up a brand new shop just outside Sheffield's main city centre called Just Micro. It was 1983 and the pair soon started to realise that a great many of their customers were not only extremely passionate about the then-fledgling hobby, but were also obsessed with creating games and artwork that was good enough for others to enjoy.

Before long the two men had expanded their little shop to publishing games as well and the newly-named Gremlin Graphics had its first game releases in 1984. While *Potty Pigeon* was a decent start for the company, it was *Monty Mole*, a game designed by Peter Harrap and Antony Crowther that would really kick things off for Gremlin and a great many releases followed.

As Gremlin grew in size it would become involved with numerous other developers and publishers, releasing games for the likes of Magnetic Scrolls, Core Design and DMA Design (before it became known as Rockstar North). It would change its name to Gremlin Interactive, employ 300 people at its peak and eventually float on the London Stock Exchange where it would be purchased by Infogrames and morph into Infogrames Sheffield House. While the spirit of Gremlin lives on today in the form of Sumo Digital (created from many Gremlin management members) this article focuses on the Gremlin Graphics and Interactive days. How many of the following did you experience?



PERCY THE POTTY PIGEON 1984

C64, ZX SPECTRUM

Gremlin's first game is notable, because two different versions exist. The Spectrum offering by Shaun Hollingworth had you guiding your pigeon around hazard-filled screens in search of worms to feed your growing chicks. The C64 offering by Antony Crowther saw you collecting sticks – and you could crash cars by defecating on them. That version was also notable for introducing gamers to legendary composer, Ben Daglish.





WANTED: MONTY MOLE 1984

C64, ZX SPECTRUM

This was Gremlin's first big hit and led to a large number of sequels of varying quality. Inspired by the miner's strike and created by Peter Harrap, it channelled the surreal style of *Manic Miner* across its many flick screens. Antony Crowther created the (dare we say it) superior C64 version and it's a notably different beast with completely different level design and super smooth scrolling. Both games annoyingly featured unpredictable crushers that can crush poor Monty without warning.



SUICIDE EXPRESS 1985

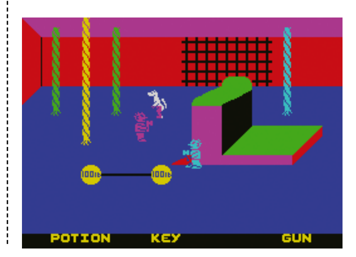
C64

This was seen as a spiritual sequel to Antony Crowther's earlier Alligata Software game, *Loco*. It was effectively a fast-paced action game where you needed to shoot down oncoming planes to amass 100,000 points. Two thirds of the screen depicted the onscreen carnage, while the final third featured a useful map to plan your route on.

MONTY IS INNOCENT 1985

ZX SPECTRUM

The second *Monty Mole* game is a strange one. In addition to focusing on a new character, Sam Stoat, the gameplay was completely different too. Where the original *Monty Mole* was a fun platformer, the follow-up was a rather bland multi-screen maze game where Sam had to find eight keys in the hope of freeing his furry pal. Interestingly, the game's title screen called it 'Great Escape'.



WEST BANK 1985

VARIOUS

This fun little reaction game was a clone of the Sega manufactured *Bank Panic*. Three doors randomly opened in front of you and you had to shoot down the bandits hiding behind them, while avoiding innocent bystanders. A highly addictive blaster that became insanely tough on later levels.



THING ON A SPRING 1985

VARIOUS

While *Thing On A Spring* was a perfectly fine Amstrad game, the C64 release was the best version. In addition to amazingly smooth scrolling and brilliantly animated sprites, it also featured a truly astonishing music debut by Rob Hubbard who would go on to become the machine's most notable composer. The game itself was a fun romp where you navigated a Zebedee-like character around a dangerous toy factory. A sequel appeared in 1987.



CREATING MONTY MOLE

Pete Harrap looks back at the original Spectrum game

Why base Monty Mole on Manic Miner?
That was the type of game I enjoyed back then – a mix of humour, simplicity and 'how do I get up there before I run out of time?' puzzles.

How did the miner's strike factor into the game?
The miners' strike angle was because my dad was a coal-face worker, annoyed that he never got a vote on the strike. Miners used to be very democratic, and it wasn't fair for my dad to be made to strike to satisfy the ambitions of Scargill, no matter how right he was about mine closures. He treated the miners as though they were stupid and couldn't decide for themselves.

Where did the inspiration for the visuals originate?
The visuals were fun, based on items that could be used in a mine, scare you, or make you laugh. My favourite was the dripping candle, although you wouldn't get a naked flame in a real mine!

Is there anything you regret about the game?
In hindsight, I'd give you a bit of warning on the crushers and clues about what might kill you – I was too cruel sometimes. But I remember standing in WHSmith, looking at my hard work on a shelf, when a nine-year-old walked up and said, 'I want that one,' which was a proud moment.

What did you think of Tony Crowther's version?
Tony's game was excellent, making full use of the C64's hardware, and, if I'm honest, it worked better than mine would have if directly ported. But mine was best. I'm biased!



MONTY ON THE RUN 1985

VARIOUS

This was the first *Monty* game to appear on the Amstrad. Once again coded by Peter Harrap, it was another solid platformer that featured the same surreal enemies and the same annoying random crushers. It also introduced Monty's Freedom Kit, which was not only needed to complete the game, but also acted as a handy anti-piracy device. It's another fine effort, but perhaps a little too tough for its own good.





GAUNTLET 1986

VARIOUS

A highly polished adaptation of the hit Atari arcade game. The 8-bit home computer versions only catered for two players instead of the usual four, but they all played exceptionally well. An expansion pack called *Gauntlet: The Deeper Dungeons* was released in 1987, the same year Gremlin's conversion of the hit sequel appeared.

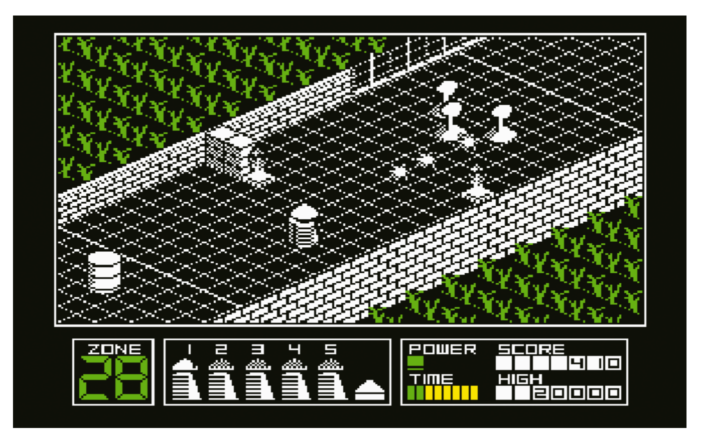




FOOTBALLER OF THE YEAR 1986

VARIOUS

Unlike other football games of the time, this innovative offering saw you controlling the fame and fortune of a single striker, doing everything you could to rise to prominence in the best clubs. It featured novel card-based and icon-driven game mechanics and received a sequel in 1989.



HIGHWAY ENCOUNTER 1986

VARIOUS

Created by Costa Panayi, this novel shooter saw you chaperoning a bomb across a danger-strewn highway. The bomb is always pushed forward by your remaining lives, meaning you needed to constantly check ahead to clear incoming enemies. Its popularity ensured that a sequel, *Alien Highway*, was released the following year, but it wasn't published by Gremlin.



JACK THE NIPPER 1986

VARIOUS

This delightful game was like a comic book come to life and saw you trying to cause as much damage as possible as the titular Jack. In addition to shooting enemies with a peashooter, Jack could smash plates, scare cats and destroy computers, all in the name of raising his 'Naughtyometer'.

THE WAY OF THE TIGER 1986

VARIOUS

This was an adaptation of the popular adventure book series that ran across six volumes. It's essentially a side scrolling fighter, with the player having to learn three distinct disciplines: unarmed combat, sword fighting and pole fighting. Famed for its large, well-animated sprites, it received a sequel, *Avenger*, the same year.



AUF WIEDERSEHEN MONTY 1987

VARIOUS

This is arguably the most impressive *Monty Mole* game, featuring a large number of screens and a surprisingly fair challenge. The aim was to travel around Europe collecting money so that you can raise enough cash to buy and retire on the Greek isle of Montos. It's filled with neat little nods to real-life European locations, too.

TRAILBLAZER 1986

VARIOUS

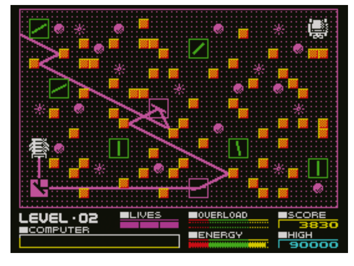
More tile jumping but this offering from Shaun Southern was notably different to *Bounder*. The viewpoint was directly behind your constantly bouncing ball and you had to race through levels as quickly as possible, avoiding the many holes and tiles that slowed you down, while hitting the speed boosts that would guide you to victory. In addition to its frantic single player mode, it also had a fantastic two-player option that pitted you against another player or the computer. A sequel followed in 1987.





DEFLEKTOR 1987

VARIOUS



Created by Costa Panayi, this excellent puzzler required you to manipulate lasers around single screen stages and guide it to a waiting receptor. The trick, however, was that you had to collect a certain number of cells before the stage could be completed. Hitting certain objects or interacting with your own beam will cause the laser to overload to critical levels which triggered the game's end. Brilliant versions of the game existed on a number of formats, including the Sharp X68000 and a sequel, *Mindbender*, appeared in 1989.

> "AS GREMLIN GRAPHICS GREW IN SIZE IT WOULD BECOME INVOLVED WITH NUMEROUS OTHER DEVELOPERS AND PUBLISHERS"

BOUNDER 1986

VARIOUS



This highly imaginative game cast you as a tennis ball that had to bounce its way through a number of increasingly tricky courses. The continually scrolling screen and clever level design meant you had to constantly plan ahead, whilst avoiding the numerous onscreen enemies and the gaps in the levels. Well received upon its release (it was awarded an astonishing 97% in *Zzap!64*) a sequel, *Re-Bounder* followed the following year, but didn't receive the same acclaim.

GARY LINEKER'S SUPERSTAR SOCCER 1987

C64, ZX SPECTRUM

This was the first of three games endorsed by the current ambassador of Walker's crisps. It's not a bad effort for the time and it plays a decent enough game, but it's shockingly unrealistic with scores of 30 goals to 17 being a commonplace result.

DEATHWISH III 1987

VARIOUS

This controversial game drew plenty of attention on release due to the sheer amount of gore it contained. While enemies could be dismantled in a number of different ways, civilians too were fair game and it was possible to blow up doddering grannies with a rocket launcher (you would lose precious points though).







JACK THE NIPPER II 1987

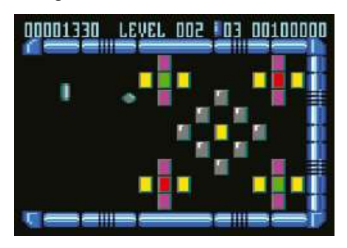
VARIOUS

After getting deported to Africa, Jack escapes and shenanigans ensue. While it dropped the pseudo 3D look of the first game, this still maintained similarities with the original, with Jack still picking up items and using them to raise his 'Naughtyometer'. It's far more platform orientated however and nowhere near as charming.

KRACKOUT 1987

VARIOUS

While *Krackout* was just another variation on *Breakout*, it at least tried to be a little different. Like *Arkanoid*, power-ups enhanced your bat, while hitting enemies would deflect your ball at annoying angles. The biggest change is that your bat is now positioned to the left or right of the screen, rather than being found at the bottom.





SKATE CRAZY 1988

VARIOUS

This neat little offering was effectively two games in one. The first, 'Car Park Challenge', had you racing round one of four courses in an attempt to impress its judges, while the 'Championship Course' played like a traditional platformer and had you racing through the stage as quickly as possible.



THE MUNCHER 1988

C64, ZX SPECTRUM

Created by Beam Software, the most impressive part of the game remains its gigantic main sprite, which was quite a sight to behold in the late Eighties. The gameplay itself is pretty limited, requiring you to demolish buildings and destroy as many tanks, soldiers and helicopters as possible, but it remains fleeting fun. It's also known as *T-Wrecks* and was originally linked to the sweet brand, Chewits.

MICKEY MOUSE 1988

VARIOUS

Gremlin was well known for dabbling in cartoon licences and this is one of its better ones. The aim was to climb to the top of several towers, defeating monsters along the way which could be taken down by either your water pistol or mallet. Along the way Mickey must complete a number of different minigames that ranged from navigating a maze to fixing pipes in order to board up the tower's many doors.





ROY OF THE ROVERS 1988

VARIOUS

While it's not the greatest football game in the world, Gremlin at least put some thought into its adaptation of the popular comic strip. It starts off in adventure territory with Roy trying to find the rest of the missing Melchester team, before moving over to a more traditional game of footy.





SWITCHBLADE 1989

VARIOUS

This interesting adventure was one of several Gremlin-published games from Core Design. Like Core's earlier *Rick Dangerous* games, *Switchblade* was a flick-screen affair, but it's far more enjoyable to play as there are less 'instant death' situations and the level design was far superior. A sequel appeared in 1991.



SUPER SCRAMBLE SIMULATOR 1989

VARIOUS

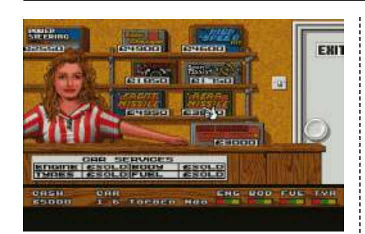
The *Kickstart* games had been a huge success for Shaun Southern when he first started out coding, so it made sense he'd return to the formulae with this spiritual successor. Unfortunately, while it featured some nice visuals and solid course design, the twitchy controls meant it was far too frustrating for its own good.



IMPOSSAMOLE 1990

VARIOUS

Monty Mole's final game is a pretty disappointing affair. Created by Core Design it's clearly inspired by *Rick Dangerous 2*, and many of the stages are indeed very familiar. It lacked the quirky charm of the earlier games, and is even tougher in some aspects, which makes the ability to play the first four stages in any order very useful.



SUPER CARS 1990

VARIOUS

Super Cars was an excellent top-down racer from Magnetic Scrolls with *Super Sprint*-styled influences. It's possible to upgrade vehicles after races and there were nine well-designed courses to race across with four distinct difficulty levels. A popular sequel arrived in 1991, the same year as Codemasters' *Micro Machines*.

HEROQUEST 1991

VARIOUS

This was a surprisingly authentic adaptation of the hit MB board game. The isometric setting does a great job of conveying the original game's setup, while the icon-driven gameplay was simple to understand. A sequel appeared in 1994.





LOTUS ESPRIT TURBO CHALLENGE 1990

VARIOUS

Lotus Esprit was an excellent racer, particularly on the Amiga, thanks to fantastic track design, a convincing sense of speed and the ability to play splitscreen multiplayer. The only thing that lets the first game down was that you were still restricted to half the screen when playing single player.

THE GREMLIN HISTORIAN

Mark Hardistry on creating A Gremlin In The Works

Why write a book about Gremlin Graphics?

I grew up in Sheffield and remember Ian Stewart and Kevin Norburn's shop, Just Micro, with great fondness. It was a place I spent a lot of my teenage years. In 2011 I was lucky enough to work with Jake Habgood, an ex-Gremlin who was leading the Game Development courses at Sheffield Hallam University. Jake's students were using the *Zool* IP, I got to meet Ian and the germ of the idea of a book started there.

How easy was it to track people down?

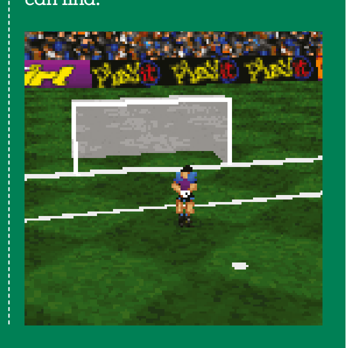
For many of the main protagonists using the usual social media routes proved very fruitful. People like Ian Stewart, Steve Lycett and Jake Habgood were still in touch with many ex-Gremlins so were able to help massively. Others took some time to track down, and a minority weren't interested in talking about the "old days".

How did Gremlin games stand apart from their competitors?

Both in the early 80s and 90s Gremlin stood out for their originality and creativity. While the rest of the industry churned out arcade or film licences Gremlin gave us *Monty Mole*, *Jack The Nipper*, *Zool*, took on EA's *FIFA* with *Actua Soccer* and delivered the hugely ambitious *Realms of the Haunting* and *Normality*. It was a hugely British company, and many games reflected the creativity and personality of the talented development teams behind them.

What are you currently working on at the moment?

I'm still writing the book! I wanted to make it an on-going project, to be able to use digital delivery mechanisms to continue to document the Gremlin story. It's called the "Expansion Disk" and every month or so it's sent out to all those that bought the original hardback book from Bitmap Books. [I am also] constantly adding stuff to the Gremlin Archive (**http://www.gremlinarchive.com/**) – a digital online repository of photos, inlays, feelies and other artefacts that I can find.



PREMIER MANAGER 1992

VARIOUS

Created by Realms Of Fantasy, this popular series is still going strong today. *Premier Manager* was a fine debut, which featured a fictitious 'Part Time' league in addition to the five available football leagues of the time.







ZOOL 1992

VARIOUS

Lots of videogame publishers had anthropomorphic platform heroes in the Nineties and Gremlin was no exception. Partly inspired by Capcom's *Strider*, and created as a rival to *Sonic The Hedgehog*, it proved to be resoundingly successful for Gremlin and was ported to numerous other systems after first being released on the Amiga. An equally solid sequel appeared the following year.





SPACE CRUSADE 1992

VARIOUS

After the success of *HeroQuest*, Gremlin lost no time in securing the rights to MB's scifi-based follow-up. It proved to be a wise move as *Space Crusade* improved on *HeroQuest*'s winning formulae by adding better aesthetics, far more strategy and much easier to read maps. It received an expansion called *The Voyage Beyond*.



TOP GEAR 1992

SNES

Despite the name, *Top Gear* had nothing to do with the popular TV show. Clearly based on the earlier *Lotus* games (right down to the split-screen presentation) it was an excellent 2D racer that still holds up brilliantly today. Barry Leitch remixed many of the original Lotus tunes as well and they still sound absolutely incredible.

LITIL DIVIL 1993

VARIOUS

Many early CD-ROM games featured impressive visuals, but were often let down in the gameplay departments. *Litil Divil* is one such example, and while it pulled the wool over many reviewers back in the day it certainly hasn't aged too well due to its simplistic puzzles and reliance on 'instant death' scenarios. It still looks mighty purty, mind.



NIGEL MANSELL'S WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP 1993

VARIOUS

Gremlin started creating more and more racing games in-house and this was one of its better early efforts. There were 16 surprisingly authentic tracks to race around, 11 real-life racers to compete against and several gameplay modes to choose from. It's also notable for being the last commercial game Gremlin released for the Spectrum.



SHADOW FIGHTER 1994

AMIGA, AMIGA CD32

Gremlin's brawler was clearly inspired by *Street Fighter II*, but that's no bad thing. The graphics were very impressive with great animation and decent backdrops, while the actual fighters were surprisingly varied and full of character. The Amiga offering does suffer from some annoying load times, and it lacks the versatility of console-based alternatives, but it still played well.



K240 1994

AMIGA

This excellent strategy game was an Amiga exclusive. It streamlined and improved many of the earlier mechanics found in predecessor *Utopia*, whilst adding its own ideas into the mix and asked that you build your colony on an asteroid. The 1997 release, *Fragile Allegiance*, was effectively an enhanced remake.



ACTUA SOCCER 1995

VARIOUS

Gremlin released several Actua games, which saw the Sheffield-based company directly competing with the mighty Electronic Arts. *Actua Soccer* was highly regarded upon release as it was the first football game to feature 3D polygonal players in addition to a 3D pitch. It was followed by several sequels.





LOADED 1995

VARIOUS

Known as *Blood Factory* in Japan, *Loaded* was a fast-paced top-down shooter that had elements of *Gauntlet* to it, but was far, far bloodier. Indeed, explosions and over-the-top gore were the order of the day here and the mindless carnage still holds up. A sequel, entitled *Re-Loaded* appeared the following year.



ACTUA GOLF 1996

VARIOUS

Designed to compete against EA's *PGA Golf* series, *Actua Golf* was a highly competent alternative that boasted smart visuals, great representations of several well-known courses and state-of-the-art motion capture technology. It's the sheer amount of gameplay options that made it so memorable however, with everything from skins to a lengthy campaign being available.

REALMS OF THE HAUNTING 1996

VARIOUS

This impressive effort was one of Gremlin's most expensive projects and also featured coding by Antony Crowther. It starts off with the lead character exploring a haunted house, but as the story unfolds the player discovers portals to different universes. It's a little cheesy by today's standards, but the FMV and notable voice-acting still hold up.



BODY HARVEST 1998

N64

Created by DMA Design, *Body Harvest* was originally due to be published by Nintendo, but the Japanese company was unhappy with its violent content. It's effectively a test-run for DMA's later *GTA* games, with the player being able to explore a huge, sprawling world and leap into a variety of different vehicles.





A GREMLIN IN THE WORKS

Your essential guide to all things Gremlin

Mark Hardistry's love letter to Gremlin Graphics is one of the most comprehensive overviews of a British games developer that we've ever read. While the lengthy Q&A format won't be to everyone's taste, the actual content that is featured across the two available books is pure gold.

Hardistry has assembled an insane amount of collaborators to tell Gremlin's tale, from co-founders Ian Stewart and Kevin Norburn to key developers like Peter Harrap, Shaun Hollingworth and Antony Crowther. The result is a frank, honest look at the highs and lows of the company that is incredibly insightful and refreshing.

Book one focuses mainly on the forming of Gremlin Graphics and looks at the numerous other companies that were connected to it and finishes in 1989. Book two continues on from 1990 to 2015, taking into account the closing of Gremlin and the numerous studios that rose from its ashes, including Sumo Digital.



Additionally there's an Expansion Disk for people who buy directly from Bitmap Books, which adds additional interviews and art. All in all an essential read for anyone who has ever loved Gremlin's games.

A Gremlin In The Works is available for £24.99 from **www.bitmapbooks.co.uk**

BEHIND THE SCENES

CRASH BANDICOOT

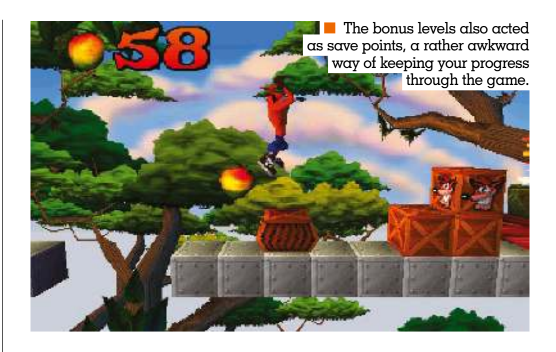
As perhaps the most iconic PlayStation mascot finalises its modern facelift, games™ explores how Crash Bandicoot shaped 3D platforming, Sony's PSone and even Naughty Dog



Released: 1996
Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Universal Interactive Studios
Key Staff: Jason Rubin (Developer), Andy Gavin (Developer), David Siller (Producer), Charles Zembillas (Character Design), Josh Mancell (Music)

FOR THOSE WHO LIVED IT, THE LAUNCH OF THE PLAYSTATION WAS AN EXCITING TIME FOR THE VIDEOGAMES INDUSTRY. Not solely because of Sony's new upstart console, but instead because the 16-bit generation that had preceded it had proven the value of gaming and now was the time for the industry to transition from toddler to teenager. This meant true 3D gaming, this meant mainstream acceptance but, more than anything, it meant an increased interest from all avenues. Hollywood, in particular, had become enthused by this new form of entertainment and with Sony getting involved, it was time to step up. This, as it happens, is how *Crash Bandicoot* came to be: from the interest of Universal and a happenstance meeting between a pair of developers who, back then, weren't quite the big names they are today.

"Skip Paul [then vice president of production at Universal Studios] had the vision to get into the videogame business, and at that time all the studios were somewhat opening up divisions," explains David Siller, one of the key producers on the original *Crash Bandicoot*. "Well anyway, Skip gets Universal to agree to put up money to start up this division." What this meant was a huge injection of cash for what would become Universal Interactive, giving the company the opportunity to invade the videogames market and, as Siller suggests, hope to one day create games – and even interactive movies – based on Universal's existing franchises. As such Universal Interactive was eager to buy up small, independent developers that it intended to use to bring this future into fruition and the Hollywood studio really was throwing money at the challenge. Naughty Dog, having yet to find a hit, had gone big on the 3DO, with Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin investing in a development kit for the console in the hopes of making it big. Their game, *Way Of The Warrior*, had been one of the key titles that 3DO wanted to display at CES, bringing the duo into the expo to show it off. As luck would have it Naughty Dog found itself running a booth right next to Universal and, over the course of the days that followed, ended up



The bonus levels also acted as save points, a rather awkward way of keeping your progress through the game.

striking a deal with Mark Cerny and Rob Biniaz who was in charge of getting Universal Interactive off the ground. "It was one of those things that they were in the right place at the right time for their future," says Siller, and without that opportunity it's unlikely Naughty Dog would ever have become the household name it is today. "Naughty Dog lucked out by being put in a position next to Universal at CES: this big more-money-than-God, NCA-owned powerhouse next to just these two guys that were very, very talented and had a little bit of money and developed their own fighting game."

The deal was for a set of three games, an atypical agreement that meant that Naughty Dog was locked in so long as it could make a product that reached Universal's lofty hopes. "Universal really wasn't saying there was a budget," adds Siller, "and that continued throughout the course of Naughty Dog's existence at the company." The design of the game, meanwhile, had been determined from the start. It was all in a six-page design document written up by Jason Rubin, detailing the gameplay and story of what was then named *Willie The Wombat*. Key elements that are recognisable were all in there, the behind-the-character camera viewpoint, the marsupial character, the different level styles and cameras.

THEY LUCKED OUT BY BEING PUT IN A POSITION NEXT TO UNIVERSAL AT CES: THIS BIG MORE-MONEY-THAN-GOD POWERHOUSE

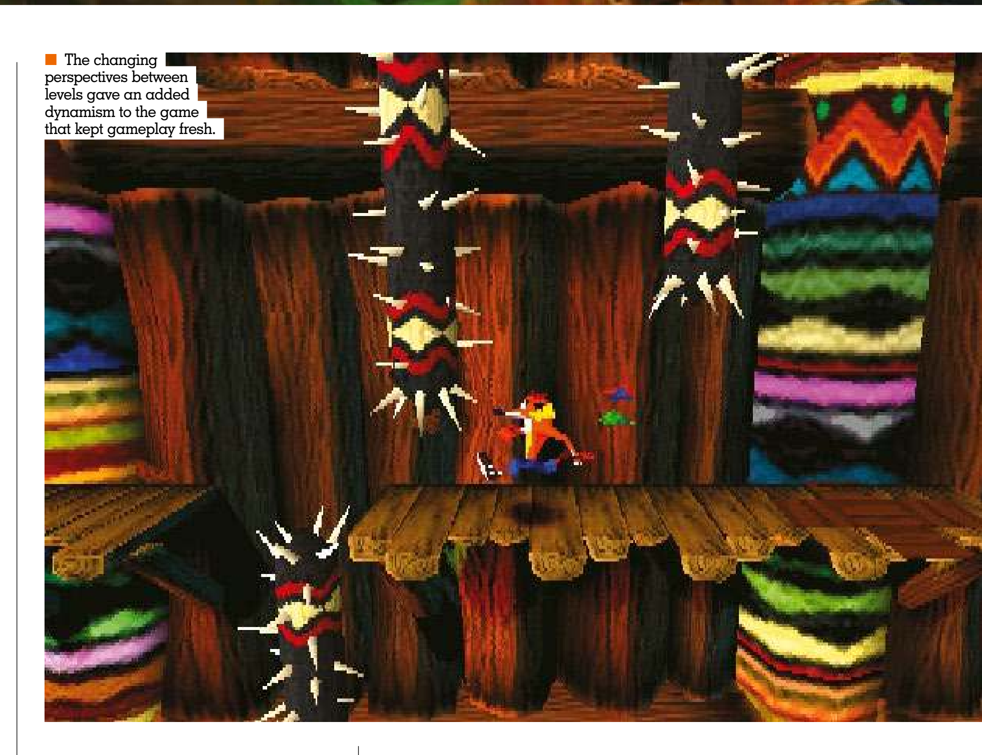
"I was told that I would be the producer of those guys on Universal's side," Siller explains, "and I met them and they told me, 'Hey, we don't want a producer,' but they were nice enough at the time. But I started designing the game from day one, because that was my expertise. That's how I got involved in the project, I was hired in and assigned to those guys and even though they didn't want a producer they eventually learned the value of my participation. Even at some point I was asked if I wanted to join Naughty Dog which I didn't." While Andy Gavin began working on the technology to power the 3D platforming environments, Jason Rubin and David Siller worked with the six-page design document and begun fleshing it out into the title that was dominate the charts.

"I co-ordinated on the design with Naughty Dog and Cerny along the way, but they were all focused on getting

Those opening segments of the game became an iconic PlayStation moment.

all the tools and art programs and technology together and I focused on the gameplay. It consistently evolved," says Siller of the way the design document changed over the game's development, "there were new bibles written." But while Siller initially designed elements of the game, as producer he was not implementing them – it was Naughty Dog's project, after all, and Siller worked for Universal. "I mentored Naughty Dog design-wise, but they were initially allowed to try and create the gameplay and that was going to be a milestone that they were going to have to clear called the 'first-playable'." This milestone was not achieved, however, the game itself was failing to offer much in the way of gameplay. "It had no gameplay," states Siller. "Willie was running around and interacting very poorly with anything and everything. There was just not a lot of gameplay. You couldn't look at the game at that point and say, 'Wow, this is a must-have game, this has the potential to be that.' It wasn't. I don't see how it could have been. The team did not have the expertise in design and planning this type of game."

As a result of this, Mark Cerny brought Siller closer into the project, using his experience from working at Sunsoft to help Naughty Dog turn *Willie The Wombat* into a title that Universal would be proud to have. "So I took the ideas that I had and put them together and showed that the game could work and become a great game," explains Siller. "I went into Andy Gavin's office and helped him work on Crash. He once came to me and said: 'We need to work on Crash's jump, and his gravity,' and we went and spent several hours together, and I had the controller in hand and we kept tweaking and tweaking Crash's jumping up and his gravity and how he would rebound, he wouldn't float. It was a collaborative effort the whole way."


The changing perspectives between levels gave an added dynamism to the game that kept gameplay fresh.

With a solid foundation now created and refined, *Willie The Wombat* succeeded its first-playable milestone and, with Universal's hopes sated, it went to seek a publisher for the game. Universal ran a trademark check to ensure *Willie The Wombat* was available, only to

CRASH COURSE

THE RISE, FALL AND POTENTIAL RISE AGAIN OF CRASH BANDICOOT



CRASH BANDICOOT

The original *Crash Bandicoot* set a standard for 3D platforming on PSone, and quickly led the charge for the genre on the-then-new console.



CRASH BANDICOOT 2: CORTEX STRIKES BACK

The sequel fixed many of the original's issues but came with a considerably bigger budget and that meant a better quality product overall.



CRASH BANDICOOT: WARPED

The third game in the PSone trilogy introduced a raft of new elements to the game, including race segments on Crash's radical motorbike, emphasising 'cool'.



CRASH TEAM RACING

While *Crash Team Racing* was largely a *Mario Kart clone*, it introduced some elements that made it a standout and a release worth your time.



CRASH BASH

At the height of *Crash* mania, this was a rather hapless cash-in on the increasingly-popular party genre in light of the release of *Mario Party*.



TWINSANITY

Long-standing series villain Neo Cortex was a focus for this game, having to reluctantly work with Crash (being actually tethered to his nemiesis) instead of against him.



TAG TEAM RACING

Taking its cues from GameCube's *Mario Kart: Double Dash*, this kart racer allowed players to combine two racers together mid-race.



CRASH BOOM BANG!

The second *Crash Bandicoot* party game released for the franchise was even less popular, releasing on DS to very negative reviews.



CRASH OF THE TITANS

The added power of the Xbox 360 did nothing to revitalise *Crash*'s now-ailing reputation, though the game itself was a solid release.



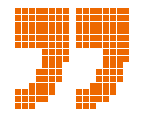
MIND OVER MUTANT

At this point *Crash* was looking to take inspiration from other popular 3D platformers rather than leading the charge as it once had. *Mind Over Mutant* tried to do too much new.

WHAT THEY SAID…

Crash's designers have decided to change the perspective from level to level, so sometimes you're looking at Crash from behind, sometimes from the top, and sometimes from all around. While occasionally maddening, this adds an element to the game rarely seen in platformers

IGN, 1996



discover that the name had been used by Hudson for its Japan-only Sega Saturn RPG *Willy Wombat*. "That game was kind of an action RPG," adds Siller, "it wasn't very successful in Japan, didn't get published beyond that. But it was an interesting-looking bipedal wombat, looked very similar to Crash Bandicoot in a way, but even more stylised with that Japanese anime look." Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin had insisted on the name from the start, a carryover from the 16-bit era where catchy names for mascot platformers was the biggest aspect to many of the games released as they all sought to dethrone Super Mario and Sonic The Hedgehog. But this was a new generation, it was about to become the PlayStation era and Willie The Wombat's rebellious attitude needed a name that could stand out. Universal arranged a meeting with both Universal Interactive Studios and Naughty Dog so a replacement name could be found. "At that meeting, a lot of names were bandied about," says Siller, "I believe a couple of guys at Naughty Dog had suggested 'Crash' and that it would be a bandicoot instead of a wombat. Everybody seemed to like that: '*Crash Bandicoot*, okay, that's catchy'. From that point on it was resolved, Kelly said, 'Okay, everyone raise your hands, *Crash Bandicoot*.' That morning we went from *Willie The Wombat* to *Crash Bandicoot*. A bandicoot was also a marsupial, we just switched one for another."

Now ready to shop the game around, Mark Cerny, Rob Biniaz and David Siller took the prototype to Sony to get concept approval, a process that – back then – was a necessity if you were to get onto the PlayStation. The meeting was a complete success, with Sony's executive vice president Bernie Stolar becoming immediately enraptured by the title and signed the product as a PlayStation exclusive there and then. "When we left we were as high as a kite," recalls Siller, "we knew we had done an impressive thing. Whenever you want to get someone's attention, you take them something that isn't maybe complete or finished, but you take them something that knocks their socks off. You go and show what your idea is, and show them in real time why you have a hell of a product. Bernie Stolar saw that. Sony came in and obviously had to have *Crash*." This was a significant moment for the orange marsupial. Siller explains that the character was set to be a Universal mascot, a character that it would use to build itself as the "modern Warner Bros." to compete with the *Looney Tunes* characters. "We were thinking that where Warner Bros. has Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck and Tasmanian Devil – they have a list of characters – Universal really didn't have that and we felt we were creating that for them. Crash, as well as other undiscussed game character plans that were being developed that never saw fruition."

I MET NAUGHTY DOG AND THEY TOLD ME, 'HEY, WE DON'T WANT A PRODUCER'

But Crash's aesthetic was more than just an idea to take on Warner Bros, the character itself had been inspired by the Tasmanian Devil himself, from his appearance to



WRATH OF CORTEX
The first PS2 outing for *Crash* was also the first time he was no longer exclusive to PlayStation, with Vivendi looking to capitalise on the series' fame.



HUGE ADVENTURE
Crash's first portable title was for the Game Boy Advance that was a fairly by-the-numbers 2D platformer. It was a fairly faithful adaptation of *Crash* gameplay.



CRASH BANDICOOT 2 N-TRANCED
This GBA sequel to *Huge Adventure* was released shortly after, targeting a younger audience with its easier-to-handle gameplay.



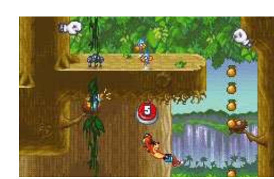
NITRO KART
Crash returned to his kart racing with this competent, yet uninspired, PS2 sequel, but failed to garner much in the way of praise or popularity.



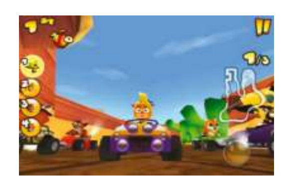
RIPTO'S RAMPAGE
This was a crossover for GBA between Crash and equally popular PSone platforming hero Spyro, with the purple dragon having a parallel release.



NITRO KART 3D
The first of a pair of mobile games released with Crash's face on it, this one is yet another kart racing game in the vein of the original *Crash Team Racing*.



MUTANT ISLAND
As you might expect from a game for the business-focused Blackberry mobile phone, very few gamers got to experience *Crash Bandicoot* on this particular platform.



NITRO KART 2
The last release for the orange marsupial before his remaster with his reputation at an all-time low, the game was at least quite popular and well received for the time.



N. SANE TRILOGY
The fully reworked original PSone trilogy is finally getting a release after months and years of hype, speculation and fan demand with Vicarious Visions handling development.



WHAT THEY SAID...

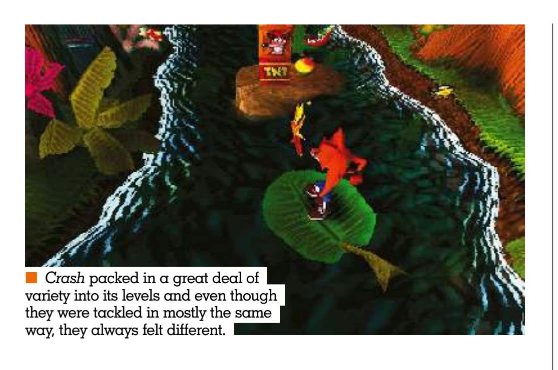
Crash's light-hearted, wacky tone and brilliant eye candy will have players bounding over obstacles and crushing crates for days on end. PlayStation platform fans should make like a bandit for this Bandicoot

GamePro, 1996





The bosses of the game were all unique and had their own fun personalities, too. Ripper Roo remains a fan favourite.



Crash packed in a great deal of variety into its levels and even though they were tackled in mostly the same way, they always felt different.



The cheeky eyebrow raising just before Crash jumped aboard a hog perfectly encapsulates the character's style.

his anarchic attitude. "Jason Rubin, in his document, had explained that he wanted this wombat character that would run upright, a bipedal character," says Siller. "The big influence he had was that he wanted to model Crash after the Tasmanian Devil." This was a focus for the design of the character, an element that Jason Rubin had decided upon from the start that was tougher to implement than it might first seem. "Well, the Tasmanian Devil had no real neck. The head kind of just sat on the shoulders, and Jason insisted upon on that. Charles Zembillas [art director on *Crash Bandicoot*] told me on a number of occasions that he had a big problem with that – it didn't lead to good turn animations and so forth." He continued to work on it, however, eventually forming the iconic character that is remembered so fondly. "Crash was this hybrid marsupial, Tasmanian Devil spiritual competitor type character. He had no neck, he was a little more slender but he was Universal's Taz."

It wasn't only the visuals that this inspiration helped create, either. Where the Tasmanian Devil was well known for his whirlwind frenzy – an element that was also used in his own 16-bit videogame – Crash had also adopted a similar technique, but evolved to make for more rewarding gameplay. "Well Crash had a shorter, more controlled spin that didn't cause him to go out of control," says Siller, "and that was developed to be a timed sequence so that the closer you got to an enemy you could spin and knock them out, but if you did it too soon and you come out of the spin as you touch that enemy then you would be damaged or you would be defeated." This, many will recall, was the death of many a marsupial, and added to the game's challenge and appeal.

MARK CERNY SAID, 'THEY DON'T LIKE YOU, THEY WANT ME TO BE IN CHARGE NOW'

Despite the excitement from Sony and the obvious quality of the product, there was no guarantee of *Crash Bandicoot*'s success. It was only towards the end of development that anyone really believed there could be something outstanding. "The Naughty Dog guys seemed to be nervous about everything," admits Siller, suggesting that Nintendo's *Super Mario 64* was especially worrisome for the team. "They would go [into the games room] and play *Mario 64*, they were always concerned about other games. But I felt that our pick-up-and-play gameplay was going to prove to be popular. I wasn't really worried about it, but there were others there that were." Towards the end of the game's development and following a lot of positive coverage in the magazines of the time, internal belief in *Crash* grew, but no one – Sony included – could have predicted the booming success it would end up becoming. "The reason I wasn't so sure that it was going to be special until it came out was because we thought there were going to be a lot of similar games. There were a lot of competent developers out there, we were coming out of nowhere, really. Where are the Konamis, the Namcos, the Crystal Dynamics? And they all did, they all came out with stuff, but nobody did as soon as we did – and for a long time – like we did. It took a while for the *Crash Bandicoot* influence to proliferate into the development community. And then *Crash* clones and *Crash*-influenced games were right and left. No, I don't think we knew that it was going to be that big. At least I didn't. Maybe Jason, Andy and Mark immediately knew that it was going to be substantial, and that's why they clamoured to take all the credit."

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Crash Bandicoot > Wrath Of Cortex > Crash Of The Titans



The first PS2 *Crash* game was going to switch to an open world design, but was scrapped when the rights changed owner.



As the franchise moved over to the Xbox 360 generation it moved rather far from its original pure platforming gameplay,





Not all was well internally at Naughty Dog, however, a hidden history behind *Crash* that has been shrouded since its release. Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin, claims Siller, were keen to weaken the impact that his design and input had on the game. "Not only me," says Siller, "but especially me, Charles Zembillas and Joe Pearson pretty much got pooped on." Zembillas and Pearson were key in the visual aesthetic of *Crash Bandicoot*, with the pair creating the unique characters while Pearson also created concepts for what the world would look like. "And I took those and it influenced me to design gameplay, the design kept going and evolving. And even Naughty Dog participated in that after I had shown and proven the way." After increased tension for Siller, the straw that broke the back was when he spoke to Mutato Muzika – the company arranging the audio for the game – and agreed to include some of their music into *Crash*. "Well apparently that information got back to Naughty Dog and Jason Rubin flew off the handle," says Siller, "and called me into his office, closed the door and started yelling at me and telling me that I had no business telling Mutato Muzika that, saying that Naughty Dog was in charge and that they were going to run the music. I tried to reassure him that I didn't talk to the press and that I was only, in as far as Mutato Muzika, a soldier under command. I was doing what I was told to do. But apparently Mark Cerny didn't back me up. At that time he said, 'They don't like you, they want me to be in charge now.' It was the final month or two, and that's what happened."

Despite the feud that had formed, *Crash Bandicoot* released in November 1996, only a year after the release of the PSone and to great critical and commercial success. "As soon as the game came out Sony knew that it was a hit," says Siller, the game's unique approach to platform game design and the attitude of its characters helping to create a game that was immediately loved by many. The series built up such a devoted audience, in fact, that the rebirth of classic PSone-era *Crash* gameplay is one of the biggest request from PlayStation fans. As the modern recreation of those original *Crash* games is due for release, perhaps now is the right time for the world to have a bit more of the orange marsupial in their lives. "I think any time you can develop a game that allows the greatest number of people to come in and instantly be able to play it," suggests Siller of how the game surged to popularity and remained so important, "without sophistication or complication, without difficulty and is fun, and it looks good and has robust colour then I think that game will become a big success. That's the reason *Crash* became the staple that it is, because it had all those elements."

A CRATE GAME

How famous aspects of Crash Bandicoot came to be...

"WE WERE TRYING to make *Crash* both conventional and unique," Siller remembers. "I created a lot of ideas and we'd discuss them and we'd employ the ones that seemed to work, like the spin move. There were a lot of types of crates that would yield different items. I was big into environmental animation, in other words having things moving in the environment so that the character in addition to having his own functionality and techniques would have to run through and jump and land on moving environment things. You have to create an interactive functionality to the play field to make the game fun, so that the player gets so involved in the game that they're enthralled."

■ While the *N.Sane Trilogy* has rebuilt all three games from scratch, the original levels and their designs remain intact.





RETRO

INTERVIEW

DAN KITCHEN

As part of a famous videogame family, Dan Kitchen has enjoyed a 30-year plus career designing, coding and producing games. From Adventure to Toys, he shares some of his memories with **games™**

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Ghostbusters [1985]
Programmer



Crossbow [1987]
Programmer



The Simpsons: Bart Vs The Space Mutants [1991]
Designer/Programmer

WHAT WAS YOUR first brush with computing and what was it like being part of a videogame family?

My first experience with computers was working on an IBM 360 in high school. Soon after that I purchased an Apple II with a cassette recorder, and I was hooked. As to the family – it was very exciting! Our father was always working on some electronic project and my older brother built a computer out of discreet components in our basement. It was the size of a large desk! When Garry got married and moved out, I took over the task of tinkering with it. He was always interested in the next innovation at the time.

What was the first game that really got you hooked on gaming?

I bought a copy of the original *Adventure* by Microsoft which was a port of the original *Adventure* created on the PDP-11. It absolutely captured my imagination and imagination was all you had. Being a pure text adventure, you had to imagine the caverns that were being crafted by the descriptions.

Did this inspire you to write your first game?

Yes, and it was a full paragraph recognition text adventure called *Crystal Caverns* for Hayden Publishing. I was 19 years old. Early on in life I knew I wanted to create games. I used to design my own board games and I built a simple digital computer in my basement out of wood, lights and a series of rotary and flip/flop switches. When I saw the Apple II I knew I wanted to use the power of computers to make games. I was always drawn to entertainment, and it seemed a natural fit for me.

> **BEING A PURE TEXT ADVENTURE, YOU HAD TO IMAGINE THE CAVERNS THAT WERE BEING CRAFTED BY THE DESCRIPTIONS**

How did you find employ at Activision?

Garry and I were working at a toy engineering company. One of our employees, John Van Ryzin came in one day with a new Atari 2600 game called *Skiing* by Activision. We were really amazed at the quality of the graphics, which inspired Garry to back engineer the console. His first game was done while we there – it was called *Space Jockey*, and was under contract for a company called Vidtec. It was the first game ever published for the Atari console by a company other than Atari or Activision.

After we quit the toy engineering firm, we started a company called Imaginative System Software (ISS) with two programming friends, including John. We took the manual for *Skiing* which had the four Activision founders on the back, and drew in our own faces and names, setting our goal to meet with them and someday work with them.

You finally did get to meet them…but they had competition from Atari…

At the 1982 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, we met with both companies. When we returned to New Jersey, they both flew Garry and I out first class to California to try and convince us to work for them. We were



Kitchen was involved in both the design and programming for the NES version of *Simpsons: Bart Vs The Space Mutants*

so excited to meet the Activision designers – they were like rock stars to us! But what really sealed the deal was the interview. Garry told the guys that I was a really good game player, specifically at Alan Miller's *Ice Hockey*. So… Al challenged me, right there in Activision's conference room. I had this special move that I'd learned that allowed me to sneak around the back of the net and then come around the front and score. I beat the *Ice Hockey*'s designer at his own game, and he was amazed. Activision then made us an offer to open their first satellite office, the Eastern Designer Centre.

You created a lot of games on the Atari 2600. What do you think made that console such a success?

Price point and simplicity – it was the first plug-and-play console that required no computer knowledge to use. Additionally, as programmers, we *had* to make the games fun and addictive as there were no fancy graphics to rely on.

What was it like converting Commodore 64 original of *Ghostbusters* to the Atari 2600?

The development time was very limited: I had to write the cartridge in two-and-a-half months from start to gold master in order to make Christmas. So I reviewed the C64 game and determined which screens I could recreate on the Atari by coding the display kernels using the limited players and missile registers I had. I think the end result worked out very well, and it sold many units that year.

After *Ghostbusters* followed a range of arcade conversions. How did you approach converting these relatively complex coin-ops to the Atari 2600?

WE THOUGHT IT WAS A FILM ABOUT TOYS, STARRING ROBIN WILLIAMS AND DIRECTED BY BARRY LEVINSON – WHAT COULD GO WRONG?!

The way I approached it was to first retain the core gameplay mechanic and then, using the limited resources of the 2600, retain as much of the graphic feel of the original as I could. For instance, when I created the 2600's port of Exidy's *Crossbow*, I had the arcade machine in my office, next to my workstation. I replicated all the screens in the arcade game, highlighting the important visual elements.

In 1986, you helped form Absolute Entertainment, along with Garry – how did this come about?

My brother and I were still working for Activision in its Eastern Design Centre, with a bunch of programmers we knew very well. Activision had already gone through many layoffs and were seeking another round of cost-cutting. Garry suggested to them that we leave and form a new company. Since Activision liked the idea of saving overheads, we separated with a number of projects they wanted to contract to us, and Imagineering – Absolute Entertainment – was born. I was vice president of creative development, and responsible for the creative design of most of our games. I also still managed to write a game every four months.

The US was still recovering from its tumultuous crash. Was it a difficult period?

Yes, and we were writing and designing games for mostly the Commodore 64, Apple II, and the Atari 2600 which had a short second life. It was a challenge because there was no specific platform with a large enough installed base to publish games for. Interestingly, my brother and I knew the crash was coming. I'll always remember one night we visited a Video Shack store to take a look at our games. Under the glass counter, next to Activision's *Barnstorming*, there was a game we'd never seen before, *Skeet Shoot* by Apollo Games. The graphics on the back of the box looked hideous. We realized at that moment that another company had back-engineered the Atari 2600, and where there was one, more would follow. By the looks of the game, it had no quality control, and that's what started the downfall. Too many bad games created too quickly, filling a market that couldn't support them.

■ Designed by his friend and erstwhile colleague David Crane, Kitchen converted the worldwide hit *Ghostbusters* to the Atari 2600

■ Kitchen did a highly admirable job of squeezing the fast-paced *Kung-Fu Master* into the Atari 2600

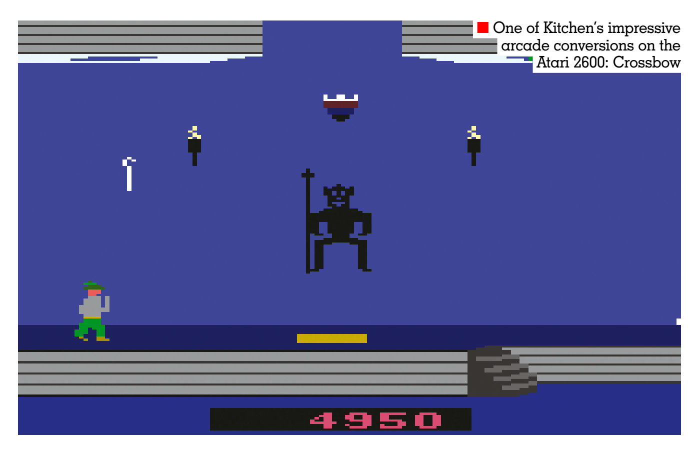
DAVID CRANE



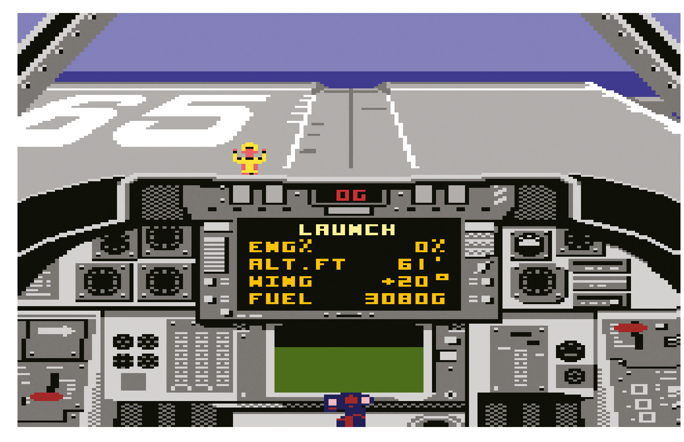
"Dan is one of a very small number of videogame creators who can trace their career back to the earliest beginnings of the industry. Back then, a single person had to come up with a unique design, write every line, draw every pixel, creative as well as technical, and Dan was one of that elite group. When the business evolved, so did Dan, moving smoothly into the role of managing a team of diverse talents. I can't think of anyone better to control the game creation process, the keeper of the vision on every game he manages."



■ By the mid-Noughties, Kitchen had moved into managing product development, overseeing titles such as *Psychonauts*



One of Kitchen's impressive arcade conversions on the Atari 2600: Crossbow







In addition to still coding his own games, Kitchen also produced many others, such as this licence of Star Trek: The Next Generation

What caused the end of Absolute?
It was a toy, or rather a film about toys. We were approached by the studio behind the Robin Williams and Barry Levinson movie *Toys*, created the videogames used in the filming, and acquired the rights to the licence for a very small fee. We thought it was a film about toys, starring Robin Williams and directed by Barry Levinson – what could go wrong?! Well, the film tanked, and we had manufactured a lot of SNES games that weren't selling at all. This inventory problem, along with the slow demise of the SNES and Genesis, creating a void before the PlayStation became a viable platform, all contributed to Absolute's inability to weather the financial storm.

How did development change throughout the Eighties and Nineties?
The Atari games were usually down to one man. On the NES, we were generally using two or three man teams. For the SNES, it grew to three or four, but there was always a main game designer/programmer who created the core game mechanic.

What did you do after, and throughout the Nineties?
Immediately after leaving Absolute, I started Morning Star Multimedia, a boutique multimedia developer/publisher. I was able to hire a lot of the ex-Absolute talent, and went on to manage a number of ports of existing games as well as titles such as *Casper: The Interactive Adventure* on PC and *Frogger* on the Gameboy.

What are you up to today?
I'm president of Tiki Interactive, a full service development and art studio creating apps, mobile games and artwork for some of the biggest names in the online business. We're also working on publishing our first two table top games this year.

What was your favourite console or computer to develop on?
The Atari 2600, because it offered the most enjoyable challenges for a designer and programmer.

Do you have any regrets, or wish you'd done something differently?
There were a few Activision games I finished for the 2600 that were never released. One was *Keystone Kapers 2*, another was a submarine shooter similar to the arcade game *Seawolf*. The third was an original game where the character from *Keystone Kapers* had to protect a dam from breaking and filling the screen with water. In the lab, we called it 'The Dam game' and I wish I'd taken a version of each along with my source code.

Looking back at your entire career, what's your fondest period?
Tough question. I have a lot of fond memories, from working in the basement with my brother Steve, catching fly balls with Garry in the back yard of his first house where we designed our Hayden Software products, to entertaining Jim Levy and Tom Lopez, the president and development VPs of Activision, in our basement lab. The wild Activision parties, working with stars such as Alan Covert, Adam Sandler, Kristi Yamaguchi, Tom Hanks and more. But my fondest memory is the excitement of flipping that Atari 2600 switch right after downloading a new edit, and seeing how the code played. We did everything then; gameplay code, graphics and sound.

Finally, you've been in the industry a long time – how do you see the videogames market today?
It's amazing. In many ways, the mobile games allow designers like me to return to our roots, where a small team can create a title. I still can't believe that people can go to college and learn what we had to create with soldering irons, PC boards, ICs and 4-bit/8-bit coding – back then, *without* an inline debugger! I remember, I once had a woman approach me at a tradeshow and scold me for all the time her son wasted playing videogames. After I reminded her that videogames were a billion-dollar industry that created thousands of jobs, she quietly retreated.

Catch first fighter Buchu in the crotch and you'll get one of gaming's first eye-bulging reactions and the game congratulating you with "ni hao" ("hello" in Mandarin)

GAME CHANGERS

YIE AR KUNG FU

Released: 1985 **Publisher:** Konami **Developer:** In-house **System:** Arcade

Konami's most notable contribution to the fighting arena also helped to set the standard for so many staples of the genre

THE MODERN INCARNATION of the fighting genre was largely established in the Nineties and to this day feels beholden to the tropes and styles of that era, most notably in the 2D, side-on arena. But back in the mid-Eighties there were a run of prominent brawlers that helped to establish the vocabulary and style of the fighting game for the next three decades and foremost among them, to our mind, is *Yie Ar Kung Fu*.

This wasn't the first fighting game to hit arcades and wasn't even necessarily the best of its era, but it had something few other titles in its field could claim to have in 1985: personality. *Karate Champ* is largely considered to be the grandfather of the modern fighter, perhaps best demonstrated by the use of a white and red gi for its fighters, the primary outfits of *Street Fighter II*'s lead characters seven years later. However it was *Yie Ar Kung Fu* that helped to give this popular arcade genre some style.

This begins with the look of the game. The basic composition of the screen for *Yie Ar Kung Fu* is pretty much exactly what we've come to understand from titles in this world with health bars for the opposing fighters centralised at the top of the screen, character names stated by each and a game world that seems to be replicating exotic real-world locales. In terms of visual communication, it was giving you all of the information you needed succinctly. You know where your health stands, you can see how much you're chipping away, but none of it is getting in the way of your primary concern; watching and reacting to the attack patterns of your opponent.

The game's roster of enemy combatants was the next area in which *Yie Ar Kung Fu* excelled

TOUGH MATCH

YIE AR KUNG FU'S TOUGHEST FIGHTERS EXPLAINED



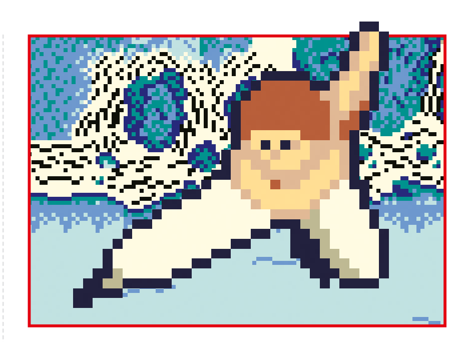
FEEDLE

★ It might not appear that Feedle offers anything to be too concerned by, but since he sends wave after wave of clone-like versions of himself at you, that's not the case. It's all about endurance with this guy as you chip away at his health with each blow you land.



CLUB

★ You might not think that a lumbering guy with a big club would be that much of a challenge to your furious fists and feet, but Club has something else that you don't: a shield. This forces you to go high and low in order to find an opening.



BLUES

★ A classic of the fighting genre, Blues is more or less a replica of your own Oolong with the same moveset and range of movement as you have. You just need to try and keep in the game with Blues for as long as possible and take advantage of any mistakes he makes.

and in so doing set a standard for the genre. Playing as Oolong, you had to fight 11 enemies (in the arcade version) each with their own unique styles and different patterns of play. What's more they all looked completely different from one another and from your primary character. This imbued *Yie Ar Kung Fu* with a lot of eccentricity. The crazy cast of characters you face off against was inspired by classic Hong Kong action cinema and by extension have more or less become staples of the genre since.

■ ■ ■ You've got a large sumo-style fighter such as Buchu, for instance, who feels like a pretty obvious precursor to E. Honda in *Street Fighter II*. Meanwhile the female opponents in the game, Star and Fan, in their variations on traditional Chinese garb have direct through-lines to the design of characters like Chun-Li and Leifang in the *Dead Or Alive* series many years later. While *Yie Ar Kung Fu* doesn't go as far as to introduce a multicultural lineup of characters in its roster (it is focused purely on kung fu variations and cinema staples) it did help to establish the concept of a mixed gender lineup.

The animations and attack patterns are what helped to make these fighters more than just reskins of course as finding their weaknesses was as important as landing your own blows. With many of the game's fighters coming at you with weapons (a staff, nunchucks and sword are all used against you at some point) you need to vary your approach and lean on a different combination of the 16 moves at your disposal. With only a punch and kick button to pick from, your arsenal of attacks was achieved through combining each of them with the eight directions of the joystick. A simple approach, but very effective. While combos as we would understand them today were not possible, a stun state from a well delivered blow meant that some attacks could be more or less strung together without fear of taking a hit in the process.

THE CRAZY CAST OF CHARACTERS YOU FACE OFF AGAINST WERE ALL INSPIRED BY CLASSIC HONG KONG ACTION CINEMA

KEY FACTS

■ *Yie Ar Kung Fu* saw a number of ports to a variety of consoles and home computers, but the roster size changed frequently, going down to just five enemies on MSX and NES.

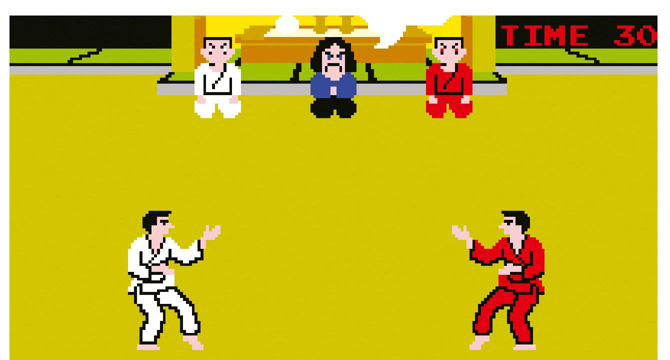
■ *Yie Ar Kung Fu II* was only released on home computers and did not see a release in arcades, which is surprising.

The combination of all of these elements helped to set *Yie Ar Kung Fu* apart from so many of the karate-focused fighters that had lead the genre up to that point, in particular giving it a sense of outlandishness and spectacle. *Karate Champ* established the one-on-one fighter and later the two-player cabinet model, but it was intended more or less as a sim of real karate championships. It was more of a sports title that required you to land a hit and score points. With its health bars, strange cast of enemies (no multiplayer yet for *Yie Ar Kung Fu*), projectile attacks you had to dodge, leaps into the air that were three or four times your own height and its colourful settings, *Yie Ar Kung Fu* was cartoonish by comparison. But that's exactly what the fighter needed to be, as so many titles that followed would prove in the coming decades. As it stands modern fighting games in 2D or 3D tend to lean more in *Yie Ar Kung Fu*'s direction, as the likes of *EA Sports UFC* might be a better comparison to the competition karate titles of the Eighties. Crazy moves, insane backstories and more are the staple of the fighting game these days, with wilder and wilder personalities helping to bring new colour and charisma to the experience. This was the game that helped to set that course.

GAME CHANGERS

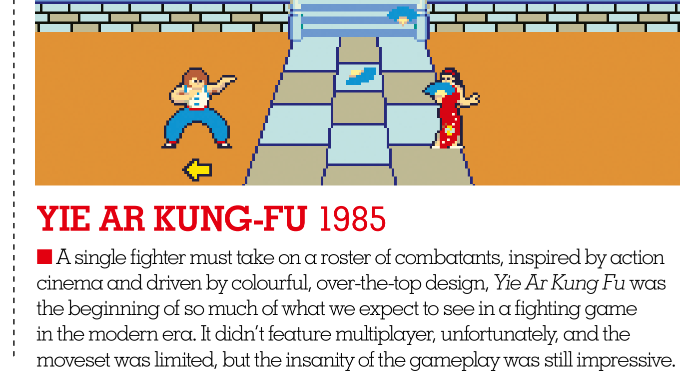
TEN GAMES THAT DEFINED THE FIGHTER

WE CHART KEY MILESTONES OF THE GENRE



KARATE CHAMP 1984

Considered by most to be the game that popularised one-on-one fighting games, *Karate Champ* sticks to competition martial arts rules with points and half-points given for landing hits. It may not have the spectacle of the fighting games that would follow, but it still had plenty of drama. *Karate Champ – Player Vs Player* would introduce two-player play, too.



YIE AR KUNG-FU 1985

A single fighter must take on a roster of combatants, inspired by action cinema and driven by colourful, over-the-top design, *Yie Ar Kung Fu* was the beginning of so much of what we expect to see in a fighting game in the modern era. It didn't feature multiplayer, unfortunately, and the moveset was limited, but the insanity of the gameplay was still impressive.



STREET FIGHTER II 1991

This was notable for a many reasons with its success in arcades leading to a boom on consoles helping to drive the genre through the Nineties, but combos is where its legacy resides. As players discovered that strings of moves could be pulled off without reply, finding and extending combo attacks became part and parcel of fighter play.



SAMURAI SHODOWN 1993

Credited as the first one-on-one fighter to introduce weapon-based combat, the likes of *SoulCalibur*, and to some extent *Mortal Kombat*, owe a debt to this release. It was one of the bloodier fighters of the period. It also built on the Neo-zoom first used in *Art Of Fighting* that had the camera move in closer as fighters approached each other for extra detail.



VIRTUA FIGHTER 1993

■ As the first fighting game to introduce 3D polygonal graphics to the genre, *Virtua Fighter* was a revelation and it's stunning to think that it landed in arcades a couple of years after *Street Fighter II*. Its button inputs were limited compared to other fighters of the time, but that gave the game an even more focused and tense feel when in combat.



THE KING OF FIGHTERS '94 1994

■ We were looking for the first example of a major crossover fighting game and it seems to us that *The King Of Fighters '94* is that game. With characters from a swathe of SNK titles like *Fatal Fury*, *Art Of Fighting* and *Ikari Warriors*, it helped to establish the appetite for these kinds of adversarial confrontation among fighting rosters.



X-MEN VS STREET FIGHTER 1996

■ While *KOF* set the industry going on in-house crossover fighters, it was *X-Men Vs Street Fighter* that set us rolling on the battle royale approach that set us on the path to see *Marvel Vs Capcom*, *Capcom Vs SNK*, *Street Fighter X Tekken* and many more. Even something like *Super Smash Bros.* may not have happened without the foundations Capcom laid down.



SFIII: NEW GENERATION 1997

■ There's a reason why *Street Fighter* and Capcom dominate the conversation when it comes to fighting games: it's the best at them, and the introduction of a parry system in *New Generation* was a huge evolution for the genre. The use of parrying in this game created new scenarios for players and spawned dramatic tournament moments.



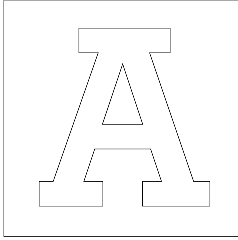
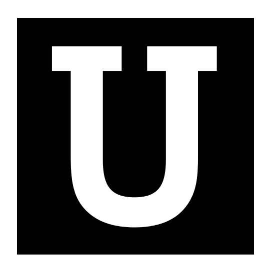
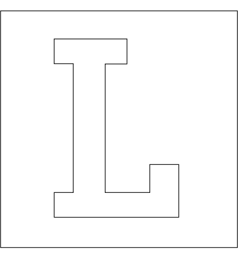
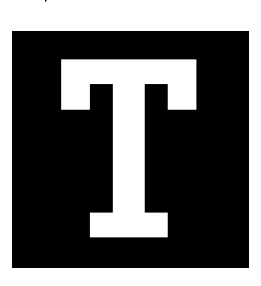
SOULCALIBUR 1998

■ Namco's 3D, weapon-based fighter had been evolving into the *SoulCalibur* series as we know it today by way of *Soul Edge* in 1995, but it was this release that introduce the eight-way run control, allowing players to dash on the Y-axis for free movement. This was the first 3D fighter to allow such control, offering players a range of new ways to play.



DEAD OR ALIVE ULTIMATE 2004

■ The *Guinness Book Of Records* credits *Net Fighter* from SegaSoft as the first fighter to introduce online play, but we'd say that the game that popularised the concept was the remastered release of Tecmo Koei's fighting titles on Xbox, *Dead Or Alive Ultimate* – with Xbox Live setting the standard for online console play moving forward.

THE 

PRO MECHANICAL GAMING KEYBOARD

MANUFACTURER: **LOGITECH** PRICE: **£129.99**

IF THERE'S A single thing we would hold up as being exemplary about Logitech's latest gaming peripheral, it has to be its clear focus on functionality. While there are plenty of bells and whistles for tinkerers to get into if they want to, the base unit of what the Pro Mechanical Gaming Keyboard gives you is top-level stuff. Incredibly fast key inputs, superb build quality and compact design – this is a special addition to your home setup.

And that obviously comes with a price tag. This is not a keyboard for the casual PC player. Designed with the help of eSports professionals, Logitech's keyboard is built for precision and intense use, but that doesn't mean that its best features are in any way out of reach for the average player. The relative degree of force needed to get input from Logitech proprietary Romer-G keys is fantastic and leads to super-responsive keystrokes.

While the simple, clean, matte design of the keyboard gives it a nice low profile, it wouldn't be a modern keyboard without some flash and it has that in spades, however, it can be implemented smartly. Using the complimentary software you can program your keyboard with a multitude of lighting patterns, game specific settings to help identify usable keys or that respond to in-game action. And it can all be saved on the keyboard's internal memory so if you choose to travel with this very portable accessory you don't need to install all that software again to get your customised look.

Smart design throughout makes this a pretty fantastic keyboard for any level of gamer. Whether or not the tenkeyless design suits your needs or not is something you'll need to work out yourselves, but if you like the compact design and like your mouse tight to your keyboard, this is an excellent choice.

www.logitech.co.uk

VERDICT 9/10



■ Logitech's gaming software has a number of preset illumination options including a number of fun rainbow effects and this key control button layout that we preferred.

■ This keyboard is pretty compact at only 361mm wide, but it packs all of the important functionality into its frame. It's fairly weighty for carrying around, though, at 980 grams.

GAMING CLOTHING



WHALE OIL

More fine work from AJ Hateley, Gametee's resident artist and creator of subtle gaming nods that make for classy shirts and more. This one is a very cool piece of advertising for *Dishonored*'s Wrenhaven oil vendor.

www.gametee.co.uk



SUPPORTIVE SHARK-MAN

No sooner had Prince Sidon of the Zora appeared in *Breath Of The Wild* than his support of Link and his general positive demeanour had become a powerful gaming meme. The Prince Sidon love-fest remains a powerful force.

www.teefury.com



WATCHER TRAINER

Channelling Chris Pratt's Velociraptor training skills from *Jurassic World*, Aloy tries her hand at some Watcher corralling on this tee and by the blue lights we would suggest she's doing a fine job as always. A nice nerd crossover.

www.teefury.com

NINTENDO SWITCH JOY-CON CHARGING DOCK

SOLD BY: **GAME** PRICE: **£29.99**

FOR THE FAMILY that games together (or just your gaming family, the one that really counts) there are probably not many smarter investments than Nintendo's official Joy-Con Charging Dock. With so many different multiplayer scenarios possible with the Nintendo Switch, if you've picked up some additional Joy-Cons to spread the gaming cheer then making sure everyone is working with battery to spare is pretty important.

Four Joy-Cons can be charged simultaneously and are just as easily clipped in and out of the dock as with the Switch console itself; just slide the controllers into position. An LED for each dock port will turn green as the Joy-Con reaches full charge, so you have an instant heads-up when a Joy-Con is ready to go.

The whole thing is charged via USB, too, which should mean you can just plug it into the Switch dock itself for all of its power needs. And of course, since it's an official Switch product, it's nicely branded and colour matched to the rest of your kit so you know it will fit in nicely with the rest of the Switch gang.

www.game.co.uk





The indent on the side of the earphone cup is what Turtle Beach is calling its ProSpecs design, allowing spectacle wearers to wear these headphones in a little more comfort.

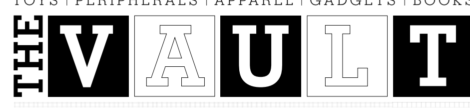
RECON CHAT GAMING HEADSET

SOLD BY: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£14.99**

IF YOU'RE LOOKING for an upgrade to your gaming chat options, but find the usual array of gaming headsets to be too cumbersome or claustrophobic, Turtle Beach looks to have released a solution to your dilemma and at a very reasonable price. The Recon Chat is a no-nonsense kind of chat headset, with a 40mm speaker straight out of its range of quality full headsets so there's no skimping on audio fidelity. Another nice touch is that Turtle Beach has favoured its ProSpecs design for the arms of the Recon Chat so that it should fit comfortably for anyone wearing glasses, something the bespectacled among you will greatly appreciate can become fairly uncomfortable during longer play sessions.

An open earcup style means that even on the covered ear you should be able to hear the game audio from your TV quite clearly – and, of course, the whole headset can be reversed to wear on either ear with the mic swivelling into position. There are Xbox One and PS4 colour scheme versions available, but either should work fine with both consoles.

www.turtlebeach.com



ULTIMATE NINTENDO GUIDE TO THE NES LIBRARY

PUBLISHER: **THE PUNK EFFECT**



PICKING UP A copy of Pat Contri's encyclopedia of Nintendo Entertainment System titles, the first word that comes to mind is 'dense'. This is a pretty meaty compendium, the size and weight of which alone could leave you breathless carrying it from the bookshelf to your lounging arrangement of choice. This is a coffee table book by design as well as by necessity, and within its pages you get a similar degree of weighty analysis and packed content.

There are, in fact, around 800 game reviews in this book, concentrating mostly on the North American releases with additional sections for exclusive PAL title and HES games. Each game gets an appraisal of its gameplay and general impressions of its quality as well as a nice 'Reflection' from the contributor in question. With most titles getting a half-page to themselves, some of the write-ups aren't massively comprehensive, but then many of them don't need to be. The big titles, such as *The Legend Of Zelda* or *Super Mario Bros.* get full pages to really get into the meat of their contribution to the Nintendo's 8-bit hit console.

As a reference we'd say this is a pretty amazing book, but we're not massive fans of the overall layout and design. It's a little too noisy with its use of background screens on every page as well as highlighted images for each title. Getting the art from every game's cartridge is great and the screens under each review are fantastically crisp, but everything feels a little messy and packed in. That's a small and admittedly rather snobbish aesthetic complaint, though, and this compendium is a fine collection all the same.

www.punkeffect.com

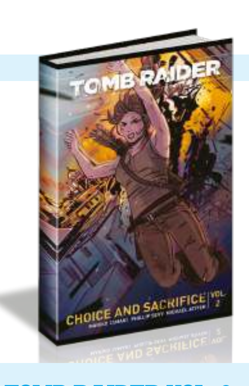




THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT COMPLETE EDITION COLLECTOR'S GUIDE

We don't tend to go big on guides, but this one for *The Witcher 3* is a bit more than just a 'how-to' on beating the game. It comes complete with combat tips, crafting guide, maps, a code for a digital version of the book and some exclusive litho prints, too.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



TOMB RAIDER VOL. 2: CHOICE AND SACRIFICE

Lara's graphic adventures continue following on from her exploits in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, but with much of the weight of Yamatai still on her shoulders. This collects issues seven through to 12 of the current comic run. Expect this one to run and run.

www.darkhorse.com



GWENT: ART OF THE WITCHER CARD GAME

How different could the concept art for a *Witcher* spinoff be? Perhaps not much, but you forget that *Gwent* brings a lot of new cards, plus a story mode, and that means lots and lots of new images from the talented concept team at CD Projekt. This should make for a gorgeous read.

www.darkhorse.com



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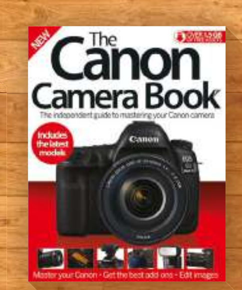
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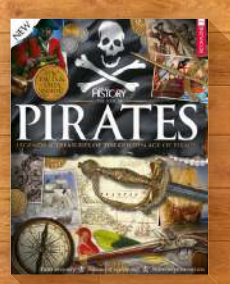
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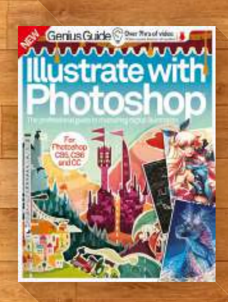




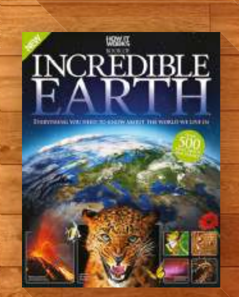


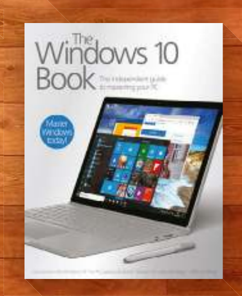








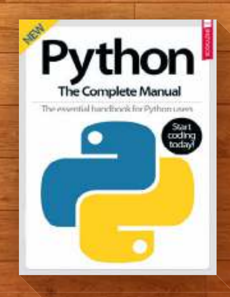


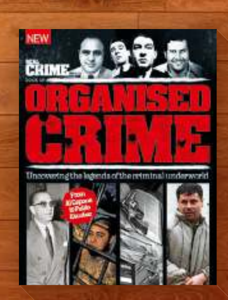


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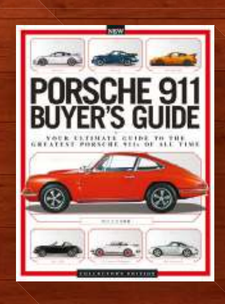


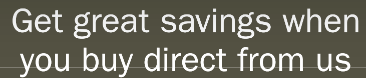












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